



8
NOVEL

Reincarnated as a sword

WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka

ILLUSTRATED BY
Llo





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Table of Contents

Color Inserts

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Chapter 1: A Shocking Encounter

Chapter 2: The Black Cat Champion

Chapter 3: The Black Cat Habitat

Chapter 4: The Northern Threat

Chapter 5: The Army of Monsters

Chapter 6: The Battlemaiden and the Faceless Knight

Epilogue

Extra Chapter: Watering Hole

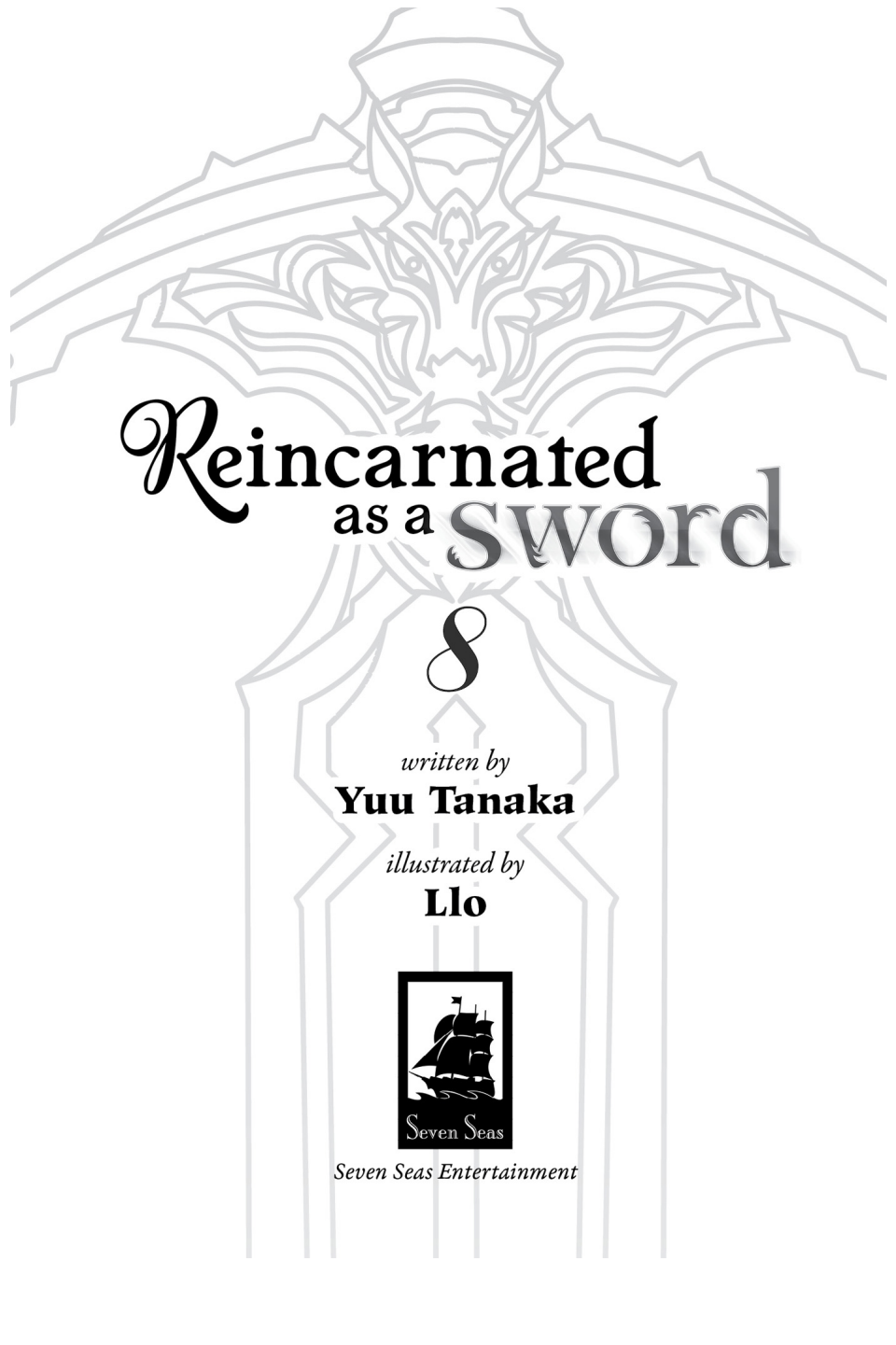
Newsletter



Reincarnated
as a **sword** 8







Reincarnated as a **Sword**

8

written by

Yuu Tanaka

illustrated by

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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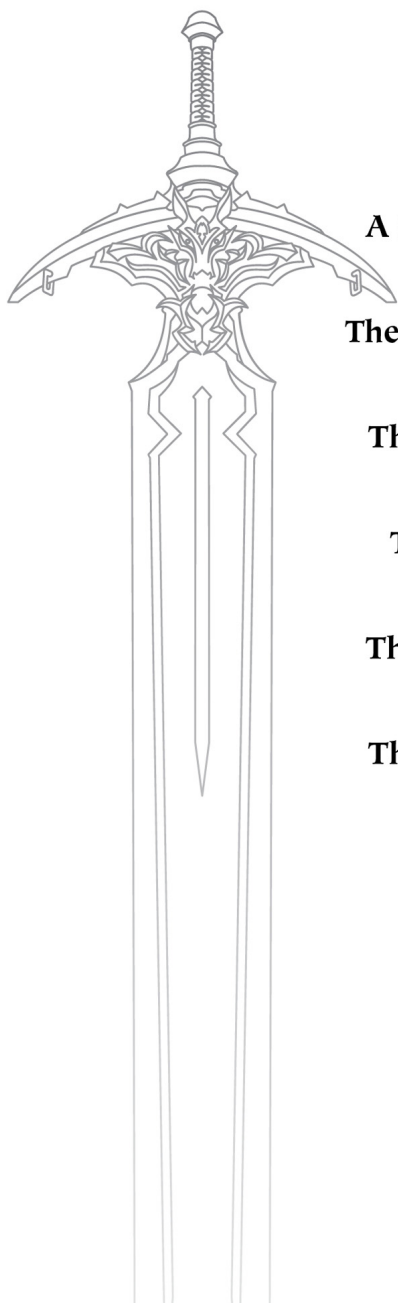
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

A Shocking Encounter

CHAPTER 2

The Black Cat Champion

CHAPTER 3

The Black Cat Habitat

CHAPTER 4

The Northern Threat

CHAPTER 5

The Army of Monsters

CHAPTER 6

**The Battlemaiden and
the Faceless Knight**

Epilogue

EXTRA CHAPTER

Watering Hole

Chapter 1: A Shocking Encounter

AFTER A LONG, hard journey, we'd finally made it to the Beastman Nation.

I guess we should go to the Horned Cart Union, I said.

Hm, Fran agreed.

We left our inn and went for a walk around the city. The guild had recommended the horned carts as the preferable way to reach Bestia, the nation's capital. There, we would find Kiara, an old Black Cat known to two of our friends from Ulmutt—their Guildmaster, Dias, and Aurel, the face of Ulmutt.

Officially, we were on a Personal Quest to confirm Kiara's whereabouts, as she had been missing for a long time. The quest was the guild's way of protecting Fran from the clutches of the Beast King, but as it turned out, Rigdith wasn't so bad after all. He was a pretty good guy, in fact—and fully supportive of the Black Cats. This meant we no longer needed the protection of the Personal Quest, though there was no immediate way to revoke it. Still, at least our visit to the Beastman Nation wouldn't be as tense as we'd initially feared.

As we walked, the beastmen in the streets turned to stare at Fran.

"Hey, isn't that...?"

"No way..."

They couldn't ignore the existence of an evolved Black Cat in their midst, and we no longer needed to hide it. If anything, we wanted to spread the news! We wanted as many Black Cats as possible to know the conditions for their evolution, and getting people talking about Fran was a way to achieve that.

If we could help enough Black Cats evolve, it might end the other beastmen's disdain for them. Thanks to the Beast King's network of merchants and aristocrats, the news was already spreading far and wide. Seeing Fran in the flesh would only cement that.

"Is that the right building?" Fran asked.

I think so. It has a blue rooftop.

The sign outside read Horned Cart Union Branch. Inside, the branch looked a lot like the Adventurer's Guild. A uniformed receptionist even came over to welcome us with a polite "Hello, there!"

The woman was human, meaning she had no idea what Fran was. When we'd walked into the guild earlier, the beastman receptionist had given us nothing short of a royal welcome. The streets were abuzz with rumors that the so-called Black Lightning Princess walked in their midst; I'd even spotted some older beastmen clasping their hands in reverence as Fran walked past.

They seemed to take an almost primal joy in seeing an evolved Black Cat, as though they were witnessing a miracle. This would take some getting used to.

"I have some questions," Fran told the receptionist.

"Is this your first time riding a horned cart?"

"Hm."

The receptionist proceeded to explain the basics. A horned cart was a mode of transport powered by a rhino-like monster called a Dual Horn. The Dual Horns were fast, and had more stamina than horses, which allowed them to travel great distances without resting. They were also F-Threat monsters, so they deterred bandits and other monsters along the road as well.

"I see," said Fran.

"Now, have a look at this."

The receptionist unrolled a lambskin parchment containing a list of prices for horned-cart services. There were details of the routes, charter rates, and cost by distance.

"I'd like to go to the capital," said Fran.

"A ride to Bestia starts at 40,000G for a shared cart and 120,000G for a private cart. The journey will take you ten days."

"That's a lot."

No kidding! A lot of time *and* money. Was this our only option?

The receptionist pointed to an area on the map. "This is Grayseal, where we are. And this is Bestia."

Fran frowned. "It doesn't look that far."

Grayseal was located on the eastern seaboard of the continent of Chrome. The capital was to the west. I didn't know the map's scale, but surely that shouldn't take ten days to traverse?

"It is quite close as the crow flies," said the receptionist. "But look here."

She pointed to a patch of green that separated Grayseal and the capital on the map.

"Forest of the Scorpion Lion?" Fran read.

"Yes. It is a thick forest Haunt known to be the habitat of a C-Threat Manticore."

A C-Threat? That was powerful enough to level a large city.

"The forest stretches far to the north and south," said the receptionist. "Skirting it adds significant time to the journey, but that's the only way to be safe."

I guess even the horned carts have their limits.

"Is there a way to go right through the forest?" asked Fran.

"Yes, but it's very difficult. Maybe even impossible for anyone who isn't a professional adventurer."

"I'm an adventurer."

"I see. It will still be a dangerous prospect, especially if you are traveling alone."

What a nice lady. This was usually the part when people condescendingly lectured Fran about how she'd never make it, taking her for a powerless little girl, but this woman just politely and respectfully explained the situation. She hadn't even mentioned money yet.

"If you are an adventurer," she said, "you'll want to go to this town here. It's a sort of staging post for entering the Haunt."

She pointed to a town right next to the Forest of the Scorpion Lion.

"Argent Lapin?" Fran read.

"Yes, that's the one. You can enter the forest from there, and you can also form an expedition party to pass through the Haunt."

So, we could either take the long way round, or go to this town and make a beeline through the forest. The choice was obvious, really. We were more than capable of surviving a C-Rank Haunt, but that still left the problem of reaching Argent Lapin. The town was due west of here, according to the map, but the situation on the ground was probably more complicated than that. I mean, who knew what kind of terrain we'd have to pass through to get there?

"How much to Argent Lapin?" Fran asked.

"It is 3,000G for ride sharing," said the receptionist, "and 9,000G if you wish to charter your own cart. The journey takes a day."

Perfect! We should start by taking a horned cart to Argent Lapin, I said.

Agreed.

At least then, we don't have to worry about getting lost! Besides, I really wanted to travel in one of these horned carts!

We put down a reservation for a shared ride the next morning. By sharing the cart, we'd have the chance to speak to the other passengers and spread the news of Black Cat evolution even further.

"May I have your identification?" the receptionist asked.

"Will my Adventurer Card do?"

"Of course."

"Here."

"Thank you. Wait, C-Rank? What?" She looked at the card, then at Fran, then back at the card. She even touched the card with a verification crystal and watched the crystal light up, signifying that the card was genuine. "And it's...real?"

"Hm. Real."

"I-I'm so sorry! Here is your card. I apologize for my terrible manners."

"Don't worry about it."

"But...wow, a C-Rank adventurer!" The receptionist was still being polite, but she clearly saw Fran in a different light now. Great respect had replaced her warm feelings for a young adventurer.

"Hm."

“We’re actually offering discounts to adventurers who can double as guards,” said the receptionist. “There’s been a shortage of people to guard the horned carts recently, you see. A C-Rank adventurer like yourself would get fifty percent off. What do you think?”

“A guard shortage?” Fran asked. “I thought this city had a lot of adventurers.”

“Most are busy protecting the ships,” said the receptionist. “Also, things have been a little tense lately.”

“What do you mean?”

“Aah. Did you just arrive in town?”

“Hm.”

“Well, our king is away at the moment, so tensions with neighboring nations have been high. Most of our soldiers are posted along the borders, which means there are fewer patrolling the cities.”

“Is there going to be a war?” Fran asked.

“I don’t think so. We do have a treaty with Basharl, although we’ve never been on good terms with our neighbors.”

The Beastman Nation espoused peace and equality these days, but they’d done some pretty terrible things to other people in the past. Basharl was founded by humans who had fled from the Beastman Nation—or been driven out, some might say. The humans founded their own kingdom and had had little to do with the beastmen since. In fact, Basharl’s politics had grown increasingly extreme in that time, to the point that ideas of human supremacy were gaining ground.

“I know I’m human,” said the receptionist. “But Basharl went too far. I mean, they used to proclaim that beastmen were an inferior species. They even tried to enslave them!”

“But they don’t do that anymore?” Fran asked.

“No. A moderate took the throne of Basharl about a hundred years ago. Since then, the two nations have virtually ignored each other.”

Better than all-out war, I supposed, but the situation was still far from ideal. Both states were left eyeing each other warily across the border. The Beast King commanded a mighty army, and it was unlikely Basharl would try anything. However, they *were* still mustering their forces, so the Beastman Nation had to do the same. Basharl’s official

story was that they were preparing to conquer a dungeon, but the receptionist was unconvinced.

“I’ve never heard anything about dungeons in that region,” she said. “If one’s newly established, they shouldn’t need tens of thousands of soldiers to clean it out. I think they’re just trying to intimidate us.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Anyway, that’s why we’re looking for caravan guards. What do you say?”

The discount wasn’t much use to us, but guarding the caravan was an official, guild-approved quest, so we accepted all the same. We were already riding the horned cart to Argent Lupin—might as well make the journey more interesting.

“I’ll keep the horned cart safe to Argent Lupin,” Fran said.

“Thank you. Your ride will leave at six o’clock tomorrow morning. Is that all right?”

“Hm. No problem.”

“Thank you very much. We’ll be waiting.”

And with that, our ride was sorted out.

Let’s look for an inn, I suggested. Then we can take it easy until tomorrow.

“No. We have to eat the local signature dishes first.”

Signature dishes?

“That’s what the sign said.”

Of course. Fran’s sharp eyes were second to none when it came to food. Besides, there were plenty of inns in town. Even if they were somehow all booked, we could always stay at the Adventurer’s Guild.

All right, then. Let’s go to the shop you saw.

“Hm!” Fran nodded, her eyes twinkling.

“Woof!”

Of course, Jet—who’d been asleep in Fran’s shadow until then—was awake at the first mention of food. Honestly, he was just as big a glutton as her. At least it would be interesting to learn a thing or two about the local cuisine.

So, where is the shop? I asked.

“Over there. Let’s go.”

“Woof woof!”

The horned cart rattled swiftly along the path, moving much faster than its horse-drawn cousins. As it sped along the road to Argent Lupin, we kept watch for any bandits or monsters, but so far everything was quiet. With no enemies around, this was just like any other cart ride. Well, aside from the speed.

“Please, Lady Fran. Take this.”

“Thanks.”

“You should have this as well.”

“Hm.”

“This too, if you’d be so kind—”

The other beastmen in the cart clearly enjoyed Fran’s company. They doted on her, showering her with snacks and bread. Most were older citizens, though despite their advanced age, none had managed to evolve. Perhaps that was why they showed Fran such special reverence—or perhaps it was because of the news that the reviled Black Cats had finally rediscovered the secrets of evolution. A passerby might take the scene for a group of grandparents doting on their favorite grandchild, but I could tell they looked at Fran like she was some kind of national hero.

The beastmen’s actual grandchildren were also awed by Fran, albeit much more cheerful and vocal about it.

“It’s so cool to be evolved.”

“Yes, Lady Fran!”

“You’re the coolest!”

“M-monsters!” the driver shouted.

The smiles disappeared from everyone’s faces at once.

“Monsters?”

“Eeek!”

“I’m scared!”

“What’s going on...?”

Suddenly, the atmosphere was tense. The elderly beastmen shrank back with fear, and the children retreated toward them. Everyone’s eyes turned on Fran, pleading for her help.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll handle it.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah!”

“You can do it, Lady Fran!”

Fran patted the children’s heads, then climbed up to sit beside the driver.

“L-Lady Fran!”

“What are we up against?” she asked.

“Them!”

A few small shadows surrounded the cart. The driver was a deer beastman, a tribe known for good eyesight. He’d spotted the shadows early, but now the creatures started to move in. There were ten canine monsters in total, each around the size of a German Shepherd.

“Can’t you just blow through them?” Fran asked.

“Pl-please be reasonable, ma’am!”

Really? I would have thought that the rhinoceros-like Dual Horn would make short work of these things. Sure, there was a pack of them, but they didn’t look that strong.

Only as the monsters drew closer did I understand the problem. These were Venom Dogs, notorious for their deadly venom. Weak as they were, a single graze from their fangs would guarantee death. This many Venom Dogs could even incapacitate our Dual Horn. We had to kill them before they got any closer.

“Keep going,” said Fran. “Don’t slow down.”

“A-are you sure?”

“I’ve got this.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

The driver obeyed Fran without any further argument. I figured being evolved had some benefits after all.

Let's get to it!

"Hm."

Fran drew me and threw me from her hand straight into the pack. Thanks to Mana Sense, I knew the exact location of the Venom Dogs' crystals. I propelled myself with Telekinetic Catapult and split two monsters' heads, swallowing their delicious crystals. I held the rest in place with Telekinesis and Wind Magic, then made quick work of them. Their fangs were dangerous, but had no effect on steel.

I absorbed the last crystals and collected their corpses—they weren't valuable, but it was always worth taking things if you could.

"That..." said the driver.

"Hm?"

"That was amazing, ma'am. That's all."

He looked both astonished and confused, but didn't ask Fran any questions. That would've been a breach of basic adventurer etiquette, after all.

"That's the last of them," said Fran. "They're all gone now."

"I see. Thank you for your help."

I surveyed the area for more monsters before returning to Fran's side. She put me back in my sheath, and we returned inside the horned cart. The elderly beastmen were already showering us with gratitude.

"Thank you so much!"

"You're safe now," said Fran.

"I owe you my life!"

"You really don't."

"Thank you so much, dear."

"All in a day's work."

Fran tried to be polite, but the praise just kept coming. Unused to this kind of treatment, she didn't really know what to do. In the end, she said she was going to go look out for more monsters, then fled to sit beside the driver. We wanted other beastmen to see what an evolved Black Cat could do, but Fran needed some rest too.

"That was quite a commotion you had going there," said the driver.

“Hm.”

He laughed politely, then left Fran alone to focus on his driving. She settled back beside him and sighed with relief. She wasn't bothered by the silence, watching the path as the horned cart charged down the road.

We encountered no further monsters, and the rhythmic vibrations of the cart made Fran sleepy. Soon, she slipped into a well-earned afternoon nap.

Four hours later, we finally saw a town on the horizon, protected by high walls.

“Is that it?” Fran asked.

“Yes. That's Argent Lupin.”

We were finally here!

“Is there an Adventurer's Guild there?”

“Oh yes, and it's a big one, too. It's right inside the entrance; you can't miss it.”

The horned cart stopped just outside the city walls, pulling up alongside some horse-drawn vehicles. Apparently, this was the equivalent of a bus terminal.

“And that marks the end of your guard duty,” said the driver. “Thanks again.”

“Hm.”

Since our payment had been a discount, no money changed hands. The driver turned to inform the passengers that we had arrived at our destination, and they all cheered as we disembarked. Four hours was a long time to go without a rest stop, but stops were reserved for ultra-long-distance trips.

Once we were on the ground, everyone bowed to Fran.

“Thank you so much, young lady!”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Goodbye, Lady Fran!”

“Hm.”

Was it going to be like this the whole time we were in the Beastman Nation? That might be an unavoidable part of our quest to

change how people saw the Black Cats, but Fran would have a rough time if this continued.

“Teacher?”

What’s up?

“I’m tired.”

We’d just have to find a way to get used to it.

At least we had no trouble getting into the town—the second the guards spotted Fran, they stepped aside to let her through. They even saluted her as we passed!

Just as the driver said, the Adventurer’s Guild was right by the gate. The one back in Grayseal had been large, but this one was even more impressively built. Were all the guildhouses in the Beastman Nation this huge? Maybe it was just a question of supply and demand. The one in Grayseal served a big and bustling port town, after all, and Argent Lupin was located right next to the Forest of the Scorpion Lion.

There’re lots of adventurers here.

“Hm.”

We spotted at least thirty adventurers in the guild tavern. The moment we set foot in the building, all their eyes were on Fran. Most looked shocked. I even heard something crash to the floor.

Best of all, not a single adventurer came forward to taunt us.

“W-welcome.” The receptionist greeted Fran with as much composure as she could muster.

“I’d like to sell some monster parts,” Fran said.

“I see. May I check your guild card for identification?”

“Hm.” Fran handed it over. “Fran, C-Rank Adventurer.”

“I-I knew it!”

Whoa—even the receptionist recognized her! As she studied Fran’s card, the woman’s face lit up even more.

“What’s wrong?” Fran asked.

“O-oh, excuse me. You wanted to sell monster parts. Please proceed to the trade counter over there. Do you have them with you?”

“Hm. Lots.”

“Very well. Right this way.” The receptionist led us to a space between the counter and the bar.

“Shall I just put them all here?” Fran asked.

“Yes.”

Should we really pile a heap of monster corpses right there? A whole herd of adventurers was drinking right next to us. Still, Fran took the receptionist’s words at face value and dropped the Venom Dog corpses where she indicated. We hadn’t had time to carve them up on the road, so they were still whole.

One adventurer let out a startled yelp, but after that, everyone settled down again. I guessed that they were used to this kind of thing. The looks they gave Fran were full of admiration, if anything. What was going on? Venom Dogs were only F-Threats.

“Did you...take out the whole pack?” the receptionist asked.

“Hm.”

“I see. Very impressive.”

As it turned out, Venom Dogs were much more dangerous than we’d given them credit for. Their fangs had put an end to many a low-rank adventurer’s career, and a pack was actually considered an E-Threat. You had to be at least D-Rank to stand a chance, and we’d annihilated them all with one hit.

The sharp-eyed adventurers noticed the corpses, as well as Fran’s Pocket Dimension, and immediately adjusted their opinion of how powerful she was.

“Can you eat these?” Fran asked the receptionist.

“Their flesh is poisonous, so no. However, you can use them to produce an antivenom, so they fetch a decent price.”

Deducting the butchering fee, each Venom Dog corpse (without its crystal) fetched around 5,000G. Pretty good for an E-Threat! *That should cover our food and lodging quite nicely.*

“Here you go,” said the receptionist, handing over the coins.

“Thanks. One more question.”

“Yes?”

“How do I get to the capital?”

“Here, let me show you.” The receptionist pulled out a map. This one was much more detailed than the one we’d seen at Grayseal’s Horned Cart Union, showing the various paths through the Haunt. “These are the available routes.”

She pointed to the Forest of the Scorpion Lion. There was a narrow path just slightly south of the town.

“As you can see,” said the receptionist, “there’s a path through this part of the forest. It’s known as the adventurer’s shortcut. If you take it, you should get through in around a day.”

“I hear there are Manticores,” said Fran. “What are my odds of running into one?”

“Oh, only one in a hundred, I’d say.”

Those weren’t bad odds, especially considering that the Haunt was named after them. I’d expected the whole area to be crawling with Scorpion Lions.

“That’s all?” Fran asked, sounding a little disappointed.

“Adventurers make for difficult prey.”

That meant the monsters were smart enough to assess the risk profile of their meals. The smarter beasts were likeliest to survive to old age, and were clever enough to hide in the thickest parts of the forest, whilst the younger, inexperienced Manticores were frequently seen around the shortcut. Groups of them even fought over territory there.

“There’s a clear path to the shortcut,” said the receptionist. “So, you shouldn’t have trouble finding it.”

According to the map, there was a town called Rose Raccoon at the other side of the shortcut. Much like Argent Lupin, it was a gathering place for adventurers preparing to enter the forest.

“I know you’ll be fine on your own, Lady Fran, but you should still put up a party posting once you’re there.”

“Party posting?” Fran asked.

“Yes. Traveling as part of a large group will make the trip safer, even if some members aren’t very good at fighting.”

Good, old-fashioned numbers were always useful against powerful enemies. And if we ran into something too strong for us, we could make a break for it while the monster was occupied with killing someone else.

It was brutal, but adventurers knew the risks when they formed temporary caravans to set out into the forest together. However, we didn't need a party. Other people would just slow us down, if anything.

We turned to leave, but a rather handsome adventurer called out to stop us. "Hello, there."

"Hm? Hello."

"I hear you're going down the shortcut. Would you like to team up with us? We're an E-Rank party, so we can pull our own weight."

I don't know, Fran. This guy looks pretty shady! He was an E-Rank, and human. I didn't think he realized just how strong Fran was.

"Why me?" she asked.

"Well, everyone was staring at you," he said. "Besides, I heard that you were C-Rank."

"And you believe it?"

"Well, beastmen generally have better stats, and they're way stronger in combat. Plus, I just ran into an awfully strong beastgirl the other day, and you're clearly at least as powerful as she was."

"I see."

Apparently, he just wanted to see what Fran was made of. Still, we had to refuse. He wasn't leaving until the day after tomorrow, and we weren't waiting that long.

We had considered riding Jet over the forest, but there was no telling how much mana that would take. It wasn't worth the risk of plummeting to earth somewhere in the deepest parts of the woods.

Well, let's get going.

"Hm."

We thanked the receptionist lady and left the guild.

It's still early. We should make for the shortcut.

"Do you think we'll run into Manticores?" Fran asked.

I know you're excited, but you really shouldn't jinx it.

Fran wasn't deterred. "I can't wait!"

Jinxes were one of the scariest things in the world. Sometimes, they helped some slack-jawed nobody hook up with the local beauty

queen. Other times, they ruthlessly killed an old soldier reminiscing over a portrait of his daughter. The worst jinxes of all were the ones that ensured total and absolute defeat as soon as you muttered the magic words, “Did we win?”

Urgh—it was too late. Fran had done it now. I could feel it in my bones.

Something moved in the undergrowth. “Groooooar!”

One-in-a-hundred encounter rate, my hilt!

“Lucky us!” Fran cheered.

A giant lion with a scorpion’s tail broke out of the woods and charged straight at us.

Name: Manticore

Race: Lion

Level: 31

HP: 399/819; Magic: 81/196; Strength: 201; Agility: 350

Skills: Sensitive Sole 1; Heightened Olfactory 6; Stealth 4; Flame Breath 6; Vigilance 4; Harden 8; Brute Force 5; Impact Resistance 6; Abnormal Status Resistance 6; Life Sense 4; Claw Mastery 7; Claw Arts 7; Earth Magic 5; Poison Shot 6; Tail Strike 9; Fire Magic 3; Physical Barrier 7; Roar 5; Nightvision; Spirit Manipulation; Enhanced Fur; Hardened Fur; Venomfang

Lore: A monster with the body of a lion and the tail of a scorpion. Boasts higher-than-usual defense, but attack power is lower than creatures of a similar threat level. Comparatively easy to kill, as long as you are cautious with its poison stinger. Care should be taken, however, as Manticores often hunt in groups.

C-Threat

Crystal location: Heart

The Manticore’s stats were a little lower than other C-Threats we had fought in the past, but it was still tough. It had a decent amount of health, and an obscene amount of Resistance and Defense-based Skills. It was best not to get complacent. Venomfang and Brute Force made the

monster a real force to be reckoned with on the battlefield.

At least, it would have been...if it were at full health.

“It’s almost dead,” said Fran.

Looks like it. More than half its life is gone.

The Manticore was covered in deep wounds. One of its front paws bled heavily, and its left eye was completely crushed. Even half of the creature’s tail was torn off—its stinger was no more.

Had it been fighting other Manticores for territory? The receptionist had told us that the young ones sometimes burst onto the path to avoid being killed by older ones. Either way, this Manticore had seen better days.

“Hm.”

“Grrr.” The Manticore sensed Fran’s strength and recoiled, but it was too wounded to run away. Instead, it hunkered down and prepared to attack.

Let’s get its crystal!

“Hm!”

Jet, you’re our lookout. There might be other Manticores nearby.

“Woof!”

Come on, Fran!

“Hm! Awaken!”

It’d be best if I took the lead in this fight. After all, the Manticore was particularly resilient against physical attacks. Magic was a better option.

“Groooar!”

“Hmph.” Fran focused on defense and evasion, repelling the creature’s attacks with Absolute Defense and Sword King Mastery.

Meanwhile, I concentrated on offense. To be on the safe side, I also prepared for teleportation—just in case we needed to get out of there. Then I pelted the Manticore with spells. *Thunder Bolt! Thunder Bolt!*

“Gyaaooooo!”

You gotta love Thunder Magic. Not only did it do a decent amount of damage, it paralyzed its target, locking down your enemy.

“Hm! It’s working!”

Let’s press the advantage.

I launched another barrage of thunder spells. A single Kanna Kamuy, or even a Thor’s Hammer, would have killed the Manticore in one shot, but those spells were so powerful that they tended to destroy the crystal. Better to go with a mid-tier spell!

Lightning Blast! Lightning Blast!

That was more than enough to fry one wounded C-Threat. By the fourth Lightning Blast, the Manticore had stopped moving.

“Did we win?”

Fran, stop jinxing it!

“Hm?”

Fortunately, there was nothing to worry about. The Manticore stayed dead, and none of its friends came to help.

I haven’t had a feast like this in a long time!

I stabbed the Manticore’s body and absorbed its crystal. A sudden rush of mana surged through my blade. There really was nothing like absorbing a powerful crystal! *I definitely wouldn’t say no to another one of those. I got two hundred points out of that!*

Unfortunately, I didn’t sense any more Manticores coming out of the bushes. I assumed Fran and I had already had our one-in-a-hundred shot.

“Grrr!” Jet growled.

“Something’s coming...!”

Yes, and it’s strong!

But this was no Manticore—it moved quickly, and carried far too much mana. Another (weaker) presence trailed behind it. If this thing was a monster, were we going to run into a whole pack?

If it comes to it, I’ll teleport us out of here.

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

Fran raised me in a guarded stance and waited for the mysterious presence to approach. I didn’t know what I expected to emerge from the

bushes, but the figure that stepped out in front of us was nothing like it.

She looked down at the dead Manticore.

“Aah! That was my quarry!”

A girl. She couldn’t have been much older than Fran—she was quite small, with short, curly hair. She had a wide forehead, eyebrows so thick they looked painted on, white hair, white ears, and even snow-white skin. All of that only served to highlight the striking red of her eyes. I saw incredible power in those crimson orbs.

In contrast to her white features, she wore glistening black armor. It suited her, but looked far too heavy for a little girl to wear.

I tried to Identify her, but I couldn’t even tell which race she was. Whether by personal skill or a powerful item, she was protected from my Heavensight. Still, I’d seen enough beastmen to deduce that she was from one of the cat tribes.

She has Identity Protection, but she looks like a White Cat. What do you think, Fran? I asked.

White Cats don’t exist.

What—seriously?

Hm. I know the tribes of my own species.

O-oh.

Not a White Cat after all! So, what was she? Considering her ears and tail, she must have been *some* kind of cat. A White Leopard, maybe? A Tiger? Or was she something else entirely?

Fran frowned at her. *She’s evolved.*

Seriously? I asked.

I don’t know what race she is... That’s weird. Why can’t I tell?

As we mulled over this problem, the girl approached. We watched her, maintaining our guard. Despite the girl’s murderous stare, she didn’t look as though she meant us any immediate harm. Still, that didn’t mean we were going to let her come any closer.

“That’s as far as you go,” said Fran.

“Grr!” Jet agreed.

“Very well,” the girl said with a shrug.

She stopped where she stood, showing no indication of closing the distance. She doubtless sensed Fran's power too, even from nearby. The girl raised her eyebrows. Perhaps she knew who Fran was? Maybe she was just surprised to see an evolved Black Cat. Her expression was hard to read.

Before we could ask any questions, something else approached through the bushes.

"Friend of yours?" Fran asked.

"Yes, indeed."

Another figure came out from the underbrush, complaining. "You are too fast for me, young lady."

You have to be kidding me, right?! I had seen some things in this world, but this might just take the cake. Is that...a maid?

It wasn't like you never saw maids in this world—quite the opposite, in fact. However, something was very different about this one. Servant garb in this world generally prioritized function over style, but this woman wore a full gothloli-style French maid ensemble, complete with frills and lace.

Talk about style over substance! And yet she was nothing like the maids in the manga I used to read. Her outfit was demure, rather than titillating—a white-and-navy-blue apron, and a long skirt that was absolutely spotless, even though we were in the middle of a forest.

The maid had sharp eyes and an even sharper figure—like Fujiko from the *Lupin* series. Her chestnut hair was tied into a long braid, and her bangs parted right down the middle. Spectacles rested on the end of her nose. Their lenses were perfectly round. That definitely got her extra points!

She has beast ears too, I realized. They were hard to make out under her cap, but her ears were black and rather equine—pressed flat against her hair, almost blending into it.



Unlike the red-eyed girl, I could use Identify on this woman.

Name: *Quina*

Age: *29*

Race: *Gray Tapir; Dream Tapir*

Class: *Maid Chief*

Level: *49/99*

HP: *539; Magic: 651; Strength: 297; Agility: 312*

Skills: *Assassinate 7; Stealth 8;*

Healing Magic 10; Royal Etiquette 6; Presence Sense 4; Conceal Presence 8; Illusion Magic 10; Phantom Magic 2; Bind 6; Weaving 7; Homicide Sense 8; Hush 7; Cleansing Magic 4; Abnormal Status Resistance 6; Interrogate 7; Mental Status Resistance 8; Laundry 8; Cleaning 10; Recovery Magic 4; Throwing Arts 8; Throwing Mastery 9; Venomology 8; Poison Sense 4; Magic Resistance 4; Mana Sense 6; Mana Drain 6; Water Magic 4; Cooking 8; Alchemy 4; Pain Disruption; Steadfast; Mana Control

Class Skills: *Awaken; Phantasm; Maid Manners*

Titles: *Assassin Killer; Healing Mage; Illusion Mage; Survivor of Hell; Cleaning King; Royal Maid*

Equipment: *Divine Silk Maid Outfit; Divine Silk Gloves; Sorcerer's Ring; Bracelet of Illusion Sealing*

Okay, so she was pretty strong. Evolved too, and with more than a whiff of the assassin about her. By adventuring standards, she was a solid B-Rank, and it probably wouldn't be long before she hit A-Rank.

"Young lady, how many times must I tell you not to stray too far?"

"Sorry, Quina, but the quarry was getting away."

"And who might this be?" Quina asked, observing Fran coldly. The maid's eyes were half-closed, as if she were sleepy, but they had an inquisitive quality. They reminded me of Fran's eyes, although Quina seemed more interested in other people.

The sight of Fran didn't seem to astonish either of them, which

was a surprise. This had to be the first time since we'd arrived in the Beastman Nation that someone hadn't gaped at her. Did they not realize that Fran was evolved?

"Honestly," said Quina, "I am doing all I can not to faint from shock."

"Indeed," her charge agreed. "I have never seen you this rattled!"

So, Quina had noticed that Fran was evolved, at least—she was just very good at hiding her emotions. Still, the girl could read her. They must have known each other for a long time.

"State your name!" the girl shouted, glowering at Fran.

Wasn't it polite to introduce yourself before demanding someone's name?

Before I could complain to Fran, the girl spoke again. "No. I shall state my name, first of all! You may call me Mea!"

"I am Quina," said her maid.

Mea placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. Beside her, Quina bowed elegantly. *What a strange pair!* At least they didn't seem like bad people.

"C-Rank adventurer, Fran," Fran replied. "This is Jet."

"Woof!"

"Fran," said Mea. "The Black Lightning Princess? So, it is you."

"Hm."

She had heard of Fran. Perhaps Mea was an adventurer...but what kind of adventurer towed her maid around with her? Maybe they were merchants? Nope, they were too strong for that. And too stupid.

"We were not expecting to see you here," Quina told Fran. "If only we could've met in a more amicable fashion."

"Right!" Mea agreed. "Anyway, how dare you steal my quarry?!"

"Quarry?"

"The Manticore! I was just about to finish it!"

Mea pointed to the sizzling Manticore corpse beside us. *I guess it wasn't fleeing a turf war after all—just trying to get away from these two.* Oops. No wonder it was half dead when Fran and I found it. If these two were just run-of-the-mill adventurers, I'd have suspected them of trying

to score free materials from our kill, but they were unquestionably strong enough to beat that Manticore to half-health.

It was hardly our fault that they let the beast get away, but I sympathized with Mea. Fran and I would probably feel the same if someone stole our kill.

I'd rather not fight them, I said. What should we do?

Hm? We can just give them the Manticore.

You don't mind?

Not at all.

The corpse was a price well worth paying to avoid a fight with Mea. I hoped she and Quina would accept the creature without its crystal, which I'd already absorbed. Still, adventurers liked to collect crystals. They could fetch a fair price.

"You can have the Manticore's body," Fran said.

Mea's scowl remained. "I have no use for it!"

"Yes, we do, young lady," Quina said calmly. "You know we are running low on travel funds."

"Fine," Mea pouted. "We shall have it! But do not think this settles our score! You took the hunt from me! And I'm so close to leveling up!"

Ah, so they needed to kill Manticore-class monsters to gain experience. Well, it was too late for that. Besides, that Manticore would probably have killed me and Fran if we hadn't fought back.

"Your fault for letting it go," said Fran.

"Urgh..." Mea pouted again, but she couldn't argue.

"The Black Lightning Princess is perfectly correct, young lady," Quina agreed.

"Mrrgh..." Mea glared at the dead Manticore. "Let us spar together, then," she said, turning back to Fran. "Do that, and I shall consider us even!"

She was so haughty—and also so stinking cute. Fran seemed willing to accept the challenge, too. She normally hated the nobility, but these two were different. Mea's swagger was natural and confident, not the kind of aristocratic sneer that demanded you defer, no matter how stupid they were.

“You want a match?” Fran grinned.

Uh-oh. I recognized that look.

“Again, young lady?” Quina asked.

“The Black Lightning Princess killed our Manticore! The least she can do is compensate me for the thrill of the hunt! And if she is as strong as they say she is, a match with her is worth ten Manticores.” Mea turned to look at Fran. “What do you say, Your Highness?”

Well, of course Fran was going to take Mea up on this. Her eyes already burned with excitement! She might not be one for words, but I could almost see her vibrate with energy.

“All right,” she said.

“Very good! Let us quit this place. We cannot fight here.”

“Hm!”

I scanned Mea and Quina to see whether they were lying, but I didn’t sense any ill intent. Mea really did just want a good, clean sparring match. Well, there was no harm in that.

“Where are we going?” Fran asked.

“First, out of this forest!”

“There is an open field beyond the woods,” said Quina. “There are small monsters there, but they should not trouble us much.”

The Forest of the Scorpion Lion might be a C-Threat Haunt, but aside from the forest’s signature Manticores, the local wildlife wasn’t very threatening. There might be plenty here to challenge ordinary adventurers, but our makeshift party was on another level.

Sure enough, Mea killed any monsters that came at us on our way out. What was more, she did it so brutally that I almost felt sorry for the beasts. This kid could’ve taken down a Manticore all on her own, if she wanted to.

As we walked, we discussed what to do with the materials from the monsters Mea killed. Eventually, we agreed that she could keep them, so long as Fran and I could have the crystals. Crystals from small monsters weren’t that valuable anyway.

Meanwhile, Quina stuffed the entire Manticore corpse into her item pouch. The pouch was like nothing we had ever seen. It only had a small opening, but it sucked the massive corpse straight in, shrinking

the body as it went. Where had Quina found something like *that?!*

Fran and Mea chatted as we moved. Eventually, inevitably, the conversation turned to the subject of food.

“Curry? I’ve never heard of such a dish—”

“It is the ultimate cuisine—”

“Pancake? Very interesting—”

“I recommend katsudon—”

Quina silently followed behind them. Her ears still seemed to lie flat on her head, but I paid careful attention to her. After a while, I noticed her ears twitching subtly, scanning our surroundings for danger. This woman was something else!

Two hours later, we finally made it out of the forest and to the edge of a vast field. It was all exactly as Quina had described it.

“Now,” Mea cried, “have at you!”

“Hm!”

As soon as Mea and Fran were out of the forest, they drew their weapons and turned on each other. They were definitely keen, but Quina grabbed Mea’s head to stop her.

“One moment.”

“What is it now, Quina?!”

Wasn’t grabbing your mistress by her head a little disrespectful? Mea didn’t seem to mind, though. *What a strange relationship.*

“Let us go farther into the plains,” Quina said. “If you fight here, the two of you will hinder other travelers.”

Good point. After all, I doubted that mere swordplay would satisfy Fran and Mea. If they fought here, they might well rip up the whole path.

“Indeed,” Mea conceded. “You have a point! Come then, Fran!”

“All right.”

“This way,” Quina said.

She led us through the meadow for another ten minutes before we arrived in a wide clearing. It was perfect. Out here, we shouldn't disturb anyone.

"You may begin your match here," said Quina. "But you must take care not to kill each other. And no Awakens, please."

"I know," Mea sighed.

"Hm!" Fran agreed.

I might not have been able to Identify Mea, but it was no surprise that she could use Awaken. Given how strong she was, I would have been surprised if she *couldn't*.

"However," Quina went on, "you may critically injure each other if you wish. In that event, I shall heal you."

"Ha ha!" Mea laughed. "I cannot wait!"

"Same."

"What about your wolf friend?" Mea asked, gesturing to Jet. "Will he fight as well? I do not mind."

Fran frowned. "But it'll be two on one."

"I shall manage!"

Fran tilted her head, but Mea just gave her a wide grin as she drew her sword. It had a wine-red grip and a pommel of glistening gold. It was of excellent quality, and glamorous to boot, but its most striking feature was the crimson dragon inlay that ran the length of its silver blade. From what we had seen so far, this enchanted sword was as deadly as it was beautiful.

"Mwa ha ha ha!" Mea laughed, pointing her sword toward the sky. "Come, Lind!"

What's with all this mana?! It rushed from Mea like a wave, followed by a red shape rising out of the sword's blade. *Is that...a dragon?!*

The red dragon emerged from Mea's sword and came to life. The inlay was still on the blade, but the beast was right in front of us.

"Kyuoooo!" it cried.

"Cute," Fran said.

The beast was small, though. Only about a meter long, at most.

Honestly, it was more of a drake than a dragon.

“Is that a Beast Weapon?” Fran asked.

“Nwa ha ha ha! Impressive, is it not? This is the Drakeblade Lind!”

Mea’s Identity Protection didn’t extend to her sword, so I took a look.

Name: Drakeblade Lind

Attack: 963; MP: 669; Durability: 887

Mana Conductivity: B+

Skills: Flame Resistance; Self-Repair; Summon Drakesoul

That was one strong sword...! Not only was its Attack value higher than mine, it *also* had an actual *dragon* living inside it. It might not have been a Godsword, but it was definitely in a league of its own.

B-but I still had more skills! I hadn’t lost yet! Sure, that sword was strong, but it wasn’t *that* strong! I could still do this!

Anyway, what was the dragon like?

Name: Lind

Race: Dragon Spirit

HP: 887; Magic: 669; Strength: 120; Agility: 300

Skills: Flame Breath 6; Fang Arts 4; Fang Mastery 5; Presence Sense 4; Regeneration 5; Abnormal Status Resistance 5; Mental Status Resistance 5; Rush 6; Thermal Detection 5; Flight 8; Fire Magic 5; Roar 4; Flame Immunity; Mana Manipulation

Unique Skill: Essence of Pyromancy 6

Lore: None

What, no lore or other details? I guessed that was because the dragon only lived in this one piece of equipment. Either way, it was strong. Not quite as strong as Jet, but still a solid D-Threat. It even possessed a Unique Skill.

I investigated Essence of Pyromancy, and discovered that it allowed the dragon to control any flames in its surroundings. I had no idea how that worked, but it seemed mighty useful.

“Lind shall face your wolf!” Mea declared.

“All right. Don’t lose, Jet.”

“Woof!” Jet agreed, turning to growl at Mea’s dragon.

“Ha ha!” Mea laughed. “He has no chance! Lind, show them the glory of the dragons!”

“Kyuoooo!”

I figured everyone was getting pretty motivated.

“Let us begin the match,” said Quina. “May there be no hard feelings, no matter who rises victorious.”

“Of course,” Fran agreed.

Mea nodded. “Didn’t plan on it.”

The match started on Quina’s signal, but neither Mea nor Fran moved. Instead, they just glared at each other, swords at the ready.

“...”

“...”

After a few moments, they began taking very small steps, circling each other and exchanging advanced feints.

Mea seemed to realize that they were at an early stalemate, and rushed in to break the stillness. “Haaaa!”

“Hmph!”

The sharp clang of metal signaled the beginning of battle. Mea was pretty good with the sword. Good enough to keep up with Fran, although Fran’s Sword King Mastery quickly outclassed the girl. Soon enough, Mea had to defend herself against Fran’s flurry of strikes, but she didn’t seem fazed by going on the defensive. Her savage smile just grew broader, if anything.

“Ha ha ha! Impressive, Black Lightning Princess! As expected of the legendary lost tribe!”

“You’re not half bad yourself.”

“As much as it pains me to admit it, you are the better

swordsman! But now, I shall hold nothing back!”

“Bring it on!”

They exchanged barbs alongside their blows. These two blood knights really were a good match for each other.

“You’ve proven yourself a master swordsman,” said Mea. “Now, how are you with magic?”

Mea shot out some flame spells, but Fran only put up a barrier and deflected them. The whirl of magic and sword strikes grew more and more intense—Fran only got faster and faster, while Mea used her superior strength to aim for a fatal blow. They were both smart enough to play to their strengths. With the way things were going, a single touch could mean death. But they just kept grinning, throwing everything they had into the fight.

There was little for me to do besides relax and enjoy the battle. Perhaps that was why I noticed that Mea sometimes fired a flame spell without casting anything. Was it some kind of silent magic, or could she control flames the same way that the Beast King could? Surely, she couldn’t be a Red Cat. She was bone white!

Still, I couldn’t deny that she and the Beast King were very much alike—if not in appearance, then in personality. Their vicious grins and combat styles were the same, too. I remembered Rigdith telling us about his daughter, but I couldn’t imagine that the princess of the Beastman Nation would be free to travel around like an adventurer, would she? Then again, this was Rigdith’s daughter. Could it be? I wasn’t quite sure what to make of it all.

As I pondered Mea’s identity, I turned my attention to Jet and the dragon. Now, that was a high-speed match!

“Grrrr!”

“Kyuuooo!”

The two monsters chased each other around the clearing, bouncing off trees and rocks. To an ordinary observer, it would look like the two familiars were blinking in and out of existence as they fought.

Lind’s quickness truly shocked me. Somehow, the dragon reached top speed in mere moments, despite the fact that Jet was the one with the Agility advantage. Lind seemed to use jets of flame to accelerate,

much like the flame spell Vernier. The creature had complete control over its movement, and could even turn tight corners in the blink of an eye.

Still, Jet had the advantage in every other respect. With his superior evasive and regenerative abilities, there was no way for Lind to finish him off. It didn't look as though I had anything to worry about on that front, at least.

"Hm!"

"Bwa ha ha ha!" Mea laughed as she and Fran clashed swords.

They were both mightily enjoying the fight, but the stalemate was breaking. Mea was bleeding from several wounds, while Fran's only injuries were superficial grazes. Fran was superior in both swordplay and magic, and Mea was having a hard time keeping up. Still, she showed no sign of giving in.

Mea put up a flame barrier and skipped backward to gain some distance. I sensed her battle fury rising. Surely, she must have something up her sleeve? Fran dispersed the barrier easily, but I still couldn't figure out what Mea was up to. Her eyes shone with rage, and she let out an animalistic growl.

"Grrr..."

Then mana surged out of her—so much that the air crackled. Was Mea Awakening, or was this some other skill?

I watched her closely, preparing to teleport us to safety, even as Fran's heart swelled with excitement and expectation. But then, Fran's gaze shifted to something behind Mea. With a single strike, the figure dispersed Mea's gathering cloud of mana.

"Gyaaaa!"

"Stop being foolish, young lady. Don't think I don't know what you were about to do."

"Q-Quina..."

Quina had snuck up behind Mea, casting a water spell to pour buckets of the stuff over Mea's head. The girl yelped with shock, then looked pitifully at her maidservant.

Quina must have used some kind of illusion spell to interrupt the duel unnoticed by Mea. When I saw Quina coming toward us, I thought

she was about to intervene to stop Mea from losing, but soon I realized that Quina's attention wasn't focused on Fran.

"Were you seriously going to try and kill her, young lady?" Quina asked.

"I-I was about to lose—"

"So what if you were? Remember, this is a sparring match."

"Urk."

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, young lady?"

"I-I apologize!"

I guessed that that was the end of the match. Fran looked a little disappointed that she hadn't gotten to finish fighting Mea, but she was satisfied enough not to insist on another round, at least.

Well, this had been an interesting encounter. We'd avoided Mea's wrath, and Fran got to stretch her legs in the bargain. The two might have come uncomfortably close to killing each other, but strangely, they seemed to get along very well.

"You are indeed as strong as the rumors say, Fran!"

"You're strong too, Mea."

They shook hands.

Fran might have won this round, but Mea still had an ace up her sleeve for next time. "You should join us, Fran. We could travel together and duel all you want."

"...!"

"Although...I suppose we are going in the opposite direction. Still, how about it?"

Wait, should this girl really be inviting total strangers to join up with her? Then again, maybe I was reading too much into it. Who knew what Mea's circumstances were?

Fran's eyes sparkled as she heard the proposal, but eventually she sighed and shook her head. "Sorry. I have a job to do."

"Ah, I see."

"But you could come with me, if you want," Fran said.

A counterattack! Guess she didn't want to part ways with Mea just

yet.

“Are you going on to the capital from Rose Raccoon?” Mea asked.

“Hm.”

“Then I apologize. For my own reasons, I cannot go to either of those places,” Mea said, bowing her head.

“Reasons?” Fran asked.

“I cannot say. I’m sorry.”

Five minutes later, we were back on the road.

“Prepare yourself for the next time we meet,” said Mea. “For I shall surely win!”

“Kyuiiiii!”

We bade them farewell and made for the town, following Mea and Quina’s directions. *Not bad, not bad at all.* I got to see an awesome maid, and Fran made a new friend.

Lively to the end, those two, I said.

“Hm. I’ll win next time.”

“Woof!” Jet barked, reminding Fran of his existence.

“You’re right,” she corrected herself. “*We’ll* win next time.”

“Woof woof!”

We’ll have to get stronger by then, I told her.

“Hm!”

And we’d have to watch out for Quina. She was a pretty slippery character, while Mea seemed to prefer more straightforward strategies. Fran might have beaten the girl within the confines of a duel, but we had no idea what would happen if they both went all out. There was so much about Mea that we didn’t know.

This was the first time Fran had fought someone her age to a standstill. Of course, she had friends of her own, the prince and princess of Seedrun among them. But none of her peers fought with a sword and spells the way Fran did. Her duel with Mea taught her a lot—enough that I was worried she would become even more of a battle junkie!

As I fretted, Fran and Jet chased each other across the field toward Rose Raccoon, still hyped up from their duel. It made for a

pretty intense game, but at least they weren't attacking each other. Still, it was probably the only game of tag to incorporate Air Hops and a bunch of other movement skills.

"Teacher," Fran said, "I can see the town!"

Yeah?

I wondered what Rose Raccoon was like. I hoped it had good food, at least. Fran and Jet would certainly be on the lookout for it!

Chapter 2: The Black Cat Champion

WHEN WE REACHED Rose Raccoon, we found quite a commotion ensuing outside its gates. The town was sizable, but even so, it looked like half the population was clamoring outside. As we drew closer, I noticed a platoon of adventurers at the center of the crowd. There were at least thirty of them, and they were all trying to pile into various horned carts.

Fran approached an adventurer. "Hey, what's going on?"

"Look, kid, I don't have time to...oh."

The adventurer turned around to look at Fran, and his eyes suddenly went wide. He stood there, petrified, with one foot already resting on the cart.

"Well?" Fran asked.

"Uh, I... You see, there's... Ahem! Excuse me."

Suddenly, he was as meek as a dormouse. Being in the Beastman Nation sure had its upsides.

"What happened?" Fran asked again.

"Ah, yes. We're organizing a caravan to protect the nobility, you see. We must depart immediately for a town in the south."

"Adventurers protecting nobles? I thought they had guards for that."

Were there so few knights left that aristocrats had to resort to employing adventurers? That seemed like a waste, but they must have had their reasons.

"The knights and guards were sent to defend the borders," said the man. "There are no reserve forces left in town."

"So, the town is completely defenseless?" Fran asked.

"No, some guards are left. But they can't afford to go far."

Still, wasn't thirty adventurers kind of overkill?

“We must keep our client absolutely safe,” said the man, seeing Fran’s skeptical look.

“Who is it?”

“Princess Menea.”

They were guarding a princess?

“I didn’t know you had a princess,” said Fran.

“We do. There she is now.”

The man pointed at a distant cart. Surely the princess wouldn’t just be standing around, would she? I strained to see where he was pointing. There was a girl on the cart, and she certainly did *look* like a princess.

“Our Guildmaster was more than happy to deploy us,” said the man.

I bet he was! The man probably jumped at the chance to show off his guild’s strength and win the royal family’s favor.

Should we go and say hi to this princess? After all, the Beast King had been really nice to us. Still, I didn’t think her bodyguards would let us just walk up to her.

What do we do? Fran asked.

Let’s get closer.

Hm.

We moved in until I felt a strong disturbance. The chills reminded me of the Coercive Influence skill I experienced in Ulmutt. Was someone using a similar skill? Had they even screened the princess’s guards before hiring them? This was starting to look rather suspect.

Back up a bit, Fran.

All right.

Once we were a good twenty meters away, the disturbance disappeared. I used Mana Sense to identify its source, and suddenly, it seemed to make sense. The area of effect centered on the princess herself.

I wanted to Identify her, but it was always risky using that kind of skill on royalty. There was a good chance that someone in the princess’s personal guard had Identify Sense, and the last thing I wanted was to

put Fran at the center of a scandal.

Instead, I summoned a clone of myself. I left this exact replica on Fran's back, then shrank myself to the size of a ping-pong ball and teleported way above the princess's head. It was a lot harder to maintain a shrunken state than an expanded one, so I didn't have much time. Taking a leaf out of Quina's stealth-technique book, I used an illusion spell to blend into the sky. It was just like wearing a stealth suit.

Time to use Identify!

Name: Menea Narasimha

Age: 17

Race: Red Cat; Gold Lion

Class: Swordsman

Level: 45/99

HP: 19; Magic: 129; Strength: 181; Agility: 202

Skills: (Acting 7); Singing 5; Royal Etiquette 6; Presence Sense 5; Sword Arts 5; Sword Mastery 5; Shield Mastery 4; Shield Arts 2; Poison Sense 4; Fire Magic 5; Dance 5

Class Skill: Awaken

Titles: Princess; (Royal Guard)

Equipment: Divine Silk Maid Outfit; (Ring of Fake Identity); Bracelet of Sacrifice

Yep, she was the princess, all right! However, there was something off about her abilities. I mean, what were those parentheses about? Acting, Royal Guard, and Ring of Fake Identity were all inside them. Were they fake parts of the princess's identity? My Heavensight and maxed-out Identify weren't enough to see her actual stats, but I at least knew which parts were fake.

What about that Royal Guard title? Was she a princess with the defensive capabilities of a guard? It didn't make sense for the princess to be her own guard, did it? I tried digging deeper, but I couldn't break through her Fake Identity.

Still, considering that she was the Beast King's daughter, she

didn't seem very strong. Her base level and skills didn't match, either—all of them were far too low. Maybe she'd powered her way to Level 49 without seeing much real action? I couldn't imagine Rigdith would allow that, but it wasn't completely out of the question.

What else...? Seventeen? I thought the Beast King said she was sixteen.

Then again, maybe she'd had her birthday while we were headed here.

At least I knew the source of the disturbance now—it came from that Ring of Fake Identity. Still, Menea must be who the adventurer said she was, right? After all, the Guildmaster vouched for her when he issued the quest. Just to be sure, I Identified the maids around her, and there was nothing suspicious about any of them.

I floated back down to Fran.

All clear, Fran. You can go say hello.

Hm. Got it.

The guards tried to stop us as Fran approached the princess, which was a good sign. What self-respecting bodyguard wouldn't stop a mysterious, armed girl from approaching royalty? However, the guards glared at Fran for all of two seconds before realizing who she was.

"The Black Lightning Princess," someone muttered.

They notified the princess, and she got off the cart. I didn't know whether she should be doing that, but she sure had the air of Rigdith's daughter about her.

"Oh," she said. "I have heard about you."

"Hm."

"Y-you're talking to the princess!" one of the guards spluttered at Fran.

The princess waved him off. "There is no need for that," she said. "Did my father not tell you to treat this girl with the utmost respect?"

Wow, I guess the Beast King really pulled through for us. Thanks, Your Highness!

"I would love to spend some time with you," the princess continued, looking a little sad. "But I'm afraid I have urgent matters to attend to."

“Hm,” said Fran. “That’s okay.”

“I apologize deeply.”

They really must need her in the south.

Now that we were close to the princess, I noticed that she didn’t resemble Rigdith at all. Plus, her powers and personality were nothing like the Beast King’s. Was she really his daughter?

Hang on—what if this girl was the princess’s body double? That would explain a lot—especially her Royal Guard title and use of Fake Identity. I knew there was something weird about her Class Skills. All the evolved beastmen we’d run into so far had their Racial Skills listed there: Black Tigers had Thunderclap, Black Sky Tigers had Flashing Thunderclap, and Golden Flame Lions had the Golden Flame of Extinction. Surely, a Gold Lion would have Gold Flame, or Flame of Extinction, or something?

This was all just too strange. Was one of the princess’s guards really using False Identity to protect her? If so, the guild had to be aware of it. Of course, it was entirely possible that the Guildmaster had other reasons for issuing the quest, even though he knew the truth of Menea’s identity.

Teacher?

Sorry about that. I think this princess might be a body double.

She’s a fake? What should we do?

Uh... There’s nothing we can do, really.

Nothing good would come of exposing her. We might start a riot, if anything, and then the government would definitely be on our case. Besides, it wasn’t like she was up to no good. We should probably just treat her as though she were the real princess, and let her be on her way.

All right.

“If you’ll excuse me,” said the not-princess.

“Hm.”

She bowed gracefully and stepped into her private cart. Finally, the caravan was on its way. Our meeting had proved very short, but I didn’t mind; we had to get to the capital as soon as possible. If she’d asked us to stay for tea, or worse, to join her guard, that would have

made things awkward. We should've been grateful she let us go so easily, if anything.

Right, I said. To the guild.

"Hm."

Rose Raccoon was a large town, but there was nothing particularly memorable about it. That was probably why it was such a prosperous place all year round. Even the food was middling. Fran and Jet munched on some skewers as we walked—satisfied, but largely unimpressed.

Suddenly, Fran stopped in her tracks.

What is it?

Someone's hiding, Teacher.

Where?

Near the gate.

I had a good look in the direction that Fran indicated. Oh, that was a strange presence, all right. It felt calm but deadly, like a predator eyeing its prey. There weren't any wild animals in town, though, so it must've been a person. Whoever it was, they were a master at concealing themselves.

Good catch.

Because it wasn't actively hostile or murderous toward Fran, I'd completely overlooked this presence. She'd done a good job spotting it.

What do we do?

Hmm... I'd feel bad if we didn't look into it.

Fran was right; this presence was much more than just some thug waiting for a shakedown.

I'll go check it out, I said. You stay here.

"Hm."

I'll be right back.

I teleported over to observe this unknown figure.

Let's see... There you are.

A shape lingered in one of the alleys next to the town gate. It was definitely using a skill to conceal its presence.

An assassin...?

I Identified the man. His name was Genro, and he was indeed a professional assassin. Aristocide was even listed under his titles! His stats showed that he was quite skilled in his line of work. If he was just part of the local mob, I would've left him alone, but I couldn't ignore an actual assassin.

Guess I could rough him up a little to see why he's here. Not too much, though. For all I knew, he was just out on his lunch break.

Still, it was better to know. I bound Genro's movements with Telekinesis and Wind Magic. *Add a dash of Earth Magic on top...*

The ground crept up around his ankles and solidified. You could never be too careful with these people.

"Urgh! What...?"

No sudden movements, now. I have you surrounded.

"Who's there?!"

Don't bother looking. You won't find me, I promise you that.

"Ugh..."

I mean, he could have found me. I was just leaning against the wall behind him. I was a sword, though, and swords didn't give out vital signs the way that people did. You had to be really good at reading mana flow to sense that I was there.

Genro the assassin, I take it?

"...!"

That's fine; stay silent. I know everything about you.

"Identify, huh?"

Why are you in town? To kill the princess?

"..."

What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?

Genro looked troubled—understandably. The assassin was dealing with someone who possessed Identify, could sneak up on him, and could even bind him while he wasn't looking. Worse than all that, his mission had failed. Props to him for keeping a cool head, though.

Who sent you?

“Urgh...” Genro’s eyes rolled back, and his face went purple. He’d probably crushed a poison pill hidden in his mouth.

Antidote.

“What?!” Genro’s eyes widened with surprise. The deadly toxin that was close to killing him mere moments ago had simply vanished from his system.

That was a really strong poison, but it’s no use.

“...”

How about you tell me what I want to know?

“Eergh! No!”

This time, Genro bit his tongue, but that wasn’t going to work either.

Heal. I don’t recommend that.

“...”

I can force you to talk, or you can just tell me what I want to know. May I suggest the second option? It will make things easier for the both of us.

“...”

No? Hard way it is, then...

I began the process of inflicting pain and collecting information. Genro was a tough customer, but I could glean info through his most poker-faced refusals. Processing his answers using Essence of Falsehood, I deduced that this man was from the kingdom of Basharl, and was sent to assassinate Princess Menea. He planned to track the princess’s cart until it was far enough away that he could dispose of her on the road. He also thought that the not-princess was the real deal, though, so I figured she was doing a pretty good job deceiving everyone.

“Urgh...” Genro was close to death.

It was time to hand him over to the authorities. *I guess I’ll call them here.*

To catch the attention of the local guard, I shot an explosion into the sky, taking care not to damage anything around me. A crimson fireball flashed across the heavens and exploded with a bang. If that didn’t get the guards’ attention, I didn’t know what would.

Sure enough, a number of guards approached us a few minutes

later, right on cue.

“You there! Don’t move!” They pointed their spears at the human duplicate I’d made of myself.

“I know, I know.” I raised my hands to show them I was unarmed, then brought Genro to their attention. “This guy’s an assassin for Basharl.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“He’s after the princess, so I took the liberty of incapacitating him. You can take it from here.”

“Hold on, we’re not—wait! He’s disappearing!”

“Fare thee well!”

The guards stood there in stunned silence as they watched my replica wave and disappear, but soon they remembered Genro. After healing his wounds, I had also knocked him unconscious and tied him up, so the guards could take him in for questioning without breaking a sweat. I watched from a distance as they carried him away. *Mission accomplished.*

I teleported to Fran’s side. *I’m back.*

“Hey, how’d it go?”

I’ll fill you in on the way to the guild.

“Hm.”

No one other than me would have noticed the way Fran’s anger mounted as I explained about the assassin. She might not have been born here, but the beastmen had been kind to her. She was upset that someone would try to kill Princess Menea, especially after the Beast King treated her so well.

Well, Genro is behind bars now.

“Hm.”

Fran and I chatted until we reached the guild, then fell silent.

“Is no one home?”

The place looked deserted. I guessed that most of the adventurers were assigned to the princess’s caravan.

“Hey, there!” A burly middle-aged man in a bandana emerged from the back.

It'd been a while since we saw a receptionist who wasn't a pretty lady. This man looked like he hauled tuna for a living.

"Hi," he said. "I know you! Black Lightning Princess, right?"

"Hm."

"I knew it! Glad to have ya!" the man bellowed happily as he inspected Fran's guild card. The guildhall was completely empty, and his voice rang through it like a foghorn. "So, what brings you here today?"

"How do I get to the capital?"

"Usually, I'd recommend taking a horned cart..."

"But?"

"But there're actually none here at the moment."

"Because of the princess?"

"That's right! Our Guildmaster always stretches us too thin. He kept saying we could afford to have fewer idle adventurers and horned carts in town. Well, I guess it makes sense that he'd want to support the royal family."

"Really?" Fran asked.

"Yeah. We've been doing much better since this Beast King took the throne. He used to be an adventurer, you know, and he hasn't forgotten about us. He's good to the guild."

So, the adventurers looked up to Rigdith? I'd thought that the Guildmaster was just jockeying for the Beast King's favor, but it seemed he was genuinely fond of the royal family. Still, I was a bit worried for Rose Raccoon. How would they fend for themselves if something happened while all their fighting men and horned carts were gone?

"Will the guild be okay?" Fran asked.

"Ha ha ha! We'll manage!"

Adventurers were always coming and going along the shortcut through the Forest of the Scorpion Lion. Rose Raccoon would probably have a whole new set of adventurers in about ten days.

"Plus," said the receptionist, "we asked for help from the guild in the capital. They'll send a handful of expert adventurers who can take care of any trouble. If anything happens to us before then, well, the

Guildmaster will look after it.”

“Is he strong?”

“I mean, he *is* a Guildmaster, you know. He’s a bit of a show-off, but he’s got skills. And he’s a real hard worker.”

It was good to know that they weren’t lacking for firepower, at least.

“Riding a horse-drawn carriage to Bestia will take five to six days.”

“And the path there?” Fran asked. “Complicated?”

“No, there’s a clear track for carriages. Keep on it, and it’ll take you straight there.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“Are you planning to leave soon?” the receptionist asked.

“Hm.”

“I see. Well, if the rumors about you are true...heck, even if they’re exaggerated, I fancy you’ll get to Bestia faster than any carriage.”

What kind of rumors were people spreading about Fran, anyway? They made her sound like an A-Rank.

Before we could reply, the receptionist frowned and looked away.

“What is it?” Fran asked.

“The Guildmaster’s asking for you.”

“Hm?”

“He’s something of a wind mage,” the receptionist explained. “He can transmit his voice to deliver private messages.”

By manipulating sound and vibrations? That sounded like a pretty advanced skill to use to send messages to a receptionist.

“Do I just go up?” Fran asked.

“Yeah. Sorry about this. Just give him a good whack if he says anything stupid.”

“Got it.”

“Don’t worry,” the receptionist said. “He’s not a bad person.”

Oh, I was already imagining *exactly* what kind of person he was!

We headed up to the Guildmaster's office, where a frivolous-looking man welcomed Fran in. "Hello, there! Glad you could make it! I am Wind Tanuki Elmute, the Guildmaster here."

An evolved tanuki? Given his name, he must've been *really* good at Wind Magic.

"C-Rank adventurer Fran."

"I know. I didn't think I'd get to meet a legend today. I'm so honored! And you're strong, too. No wonder the Beast King gave you his seal of approval."

Elmute was overly familiar, but just as the receptionist said, he didn't seem like a bad person. The hand on Fran's shoulder was a bit much, though. If he got any closer, I might have to do something.

Jet felt the same way. "Grrr!"

"So," said Fran, "what do you want?"

"Right down to business, eh? Well, there's a favor I want to ask you."

"A favor?"

"We just caught an assassin. Apparently, he was sent to kill the princess."

"Princess Menea?"

"The very same."

Was Elmute talking about Genro? Wow—word of that had traveled fast. Had the guards already questioned Genro? Even if so, it seemed unlikely that the information would have reached the guild already.

Elmute must have seen the look on Fran's face. "I have some manatech installed in the holding cells," he explained. "It updated me a few minutes ago. You really do have perfect timing. The gods themselves must have sent you."

"So," said Fran, "what do you want me to do?"

"Simple. Just take this letter to the capital. I'll even list it as a quest."

Elmute pinched the letter between two fingers like some kind of

card player, handing it to Fran.

“Do I just turn it in to the guild at the capital?” she asked.

“Uh-huh. On the double, if you please. I know you’ll make it there faster than a carriage.”

I decided we might as well accept. We were going to the capital anyway, and it was a personal request from a Guildmaster. It was always good to have one of those guys in your debt.

“All right,” said Fran. “I’ll take your quest.”

“Thank you, you’re an angel! Deliver the letter as soon as possible. It contains a request to bolster the princess’s guard.”

“But the princess has all those adventurers protecting her.”

“She does... Well, I suppose there’s no harm in telling you. But don’t tell anyone else, all right? This is highly confidential.”

“Hm. I swear on my tail.”

“The princess in this city was actually a body double,” Elmute whispered in Fran’s ear. “The real princess is elsewhere.”

I knew it. All those adventurers and horned carts must have been intended to make the not-princess seem authentic. Well, Genro was fooled, so I figured it worked. Still, there were likely to be at least a few assassins too smart to fall for it.

“The delivery of this letter is crucial to the real princess’s safety,” said Elmute.

“All right.”

“That said, would you like some lunch before you leave?”

“I thought you wanted me to deliver this ASAP?”

“I do. But filling a woman’s stomach is far more important than a measly quest!”

That came out...bad, Elmute. What was his angle here? We should show him that we meant business, just to be sure.

“Hm.” Fran punched the Guildmaster in the gut without batting an eye.

Elmute was as squishy as mages came. He curled into himself and fell to his knees. “Gack! Why did you...?”

“The receptionist said to give you a whack if you said anything stupid.”

“That’s not... Urgh! My stomach...”

“Tell me the fastest way to the capital,” said Fran.

“Okay...”

When Elmute was done explaining, we took the letter and headed off for the capital. We’d planned to stay in Rose Raccoon overnight and sample the local cuisine, but we hadn’t a moment to lose. There were assassins to foil and a princess to save, after all. Besides, Rose Raccoon’s food wasn’t that great anyway.

Let’s get going, I said.

“We’re counting on you, Jet.”

“Woof!”

There was only a single fork in the road to the capital, so long as we kept to the right, we had a straight path all the way there.

Fly, Jet!

“Woof woof!”

Jet picked up speed and lifted up into the air. At full tilt, he was faster than any horned cart. If a horse-drawn carriage took five or six days to get to Bestia, we’d probably be there by tomorrow.

Giddy up, Jet! Woo-hoo!

“Whoo!”

“Awoooo!”

Jet sped up, enjoying the chance to stretch his legs. We might reach the capital even sooner than I’d anticipated.

Eight hours later, Bestia was already within sight.

“Is that the capital?” Fran asked.

Has to be. I don’t think any other city would have buildings that tall.

“Hm. Real big.”

I guess that explains the tower we spotted a while back.

Fire and magic lit up the tower's ramparts and spires. Bestia looked just like a city in a fairy tale. This was the first time we'd visited a capital city. The biggest place we'd been was Bulbola, and Bestia dwarfed it. The capital's city walls were over twenty meters high, and the castle at its center was by far the tallest building I'd seen since arriving in this world. You could spot its spire from miles away!

It's late already. I wonder whether they'll let us in, I said.

I don't mind camping out.

Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

Most cities shut their gates at night to keep out monsters and robbers. But as Fran and I drew closer, we saw that Bestia's gates were still open. What's more, a small crowd of merchants and adventurers gathered in front of the entrance. I guessed that the capital had a lot of visitors, both day and night.

As we drew closer, Jet shrank himself down to a more reasonable size. It was late, after all. I couldn't imagine what panic we'd cause if a giant direwolf emerged from the darkness.

We joined the queue quietly, but it didn't matter. Fran immediately stood out. The people around us were already staring—first, at the weak black cat with a direwolf for a familiar. Then, upon closer inspection, at the fact that Fran was evolved.

“Huh? How?”

“I must be getting tired...”

“You idiot, that's *her*—”

“The Black Lightning Princess.”

“The Black Lightning Princess? Where—”

The merchants and adventurers whispered amongst themselves, but Fran and Jet paid them no mind. They were getting used to it.

However, a few minutes later, a voice cut through the muttering. “Excuse me. Are you the Black Lightning Princess?”

“Hm?”

A young Red Cat had called out to us. He had another Red Cat, probably his older sister, and a middle-aged Blue Cat with him. “We're

a party of cat tribespeople called the Six Whiskers. We've always wanted to meet you!"

"You really have evolved," his sister said to Fran.

"So," said the Blue Cat, "the rumors were true!"

I kept an eye on the Blue Cat especially, but he had no intention of threatening Fran. In fact, he sounded genuinely admiring. I guessed that the Beast King had done a lot to change how his subjects treated the Black Cats under his protection...though it could also just have been that there were some half-decent Blue Cats in this country.

The party seemed a little worried about whether Fran would answer their questions about her evolution, and they were delighted when she did.

By the time we approached the front of the line, another figure came up to us. This guy was big, over two meters tall, and he was headed straight for Fran. Unlike the others, he was clearly hostile.

"You the kid they call the Black Lightning Princess?"

"Hm? Yeah."

"Ga ha ha! My uncle lost to a little girl like you? He's gone soft!"

The big man laughed and slapped his thighs. I didn't like the look of this. His uncle? Who was he talking about? A quick Identify revealed that the man was an unevolved White Rhino named Gwendartha. Ah—that made sense of everything! We'd only met one other White Rhino with a name like that.

Fran, I think that this guy is Gaudartha's nephew.

Gaudartha was an A-Rank rhino beastman, and a personal guard of the Beast King. He'd also lost to Fran in the tournament.

"You know Gaudartha?" Fran asked.

"Ha! You don't even respect him enough to call him 'sir'! Yeah, I know him. The name's Gwendartha. That weakling is my father's brother, as much as it shames me to admit it!"

"Weakling?"

Fran frowned. Her annoyance was palpable. Not only had Gwendartha appeared out of nowhere and insulted her—now he was badmouthing a warrior she'd fought a good, clean battle with and held in high esteem.

But Gwendartha wasn't about to back off. "You heard me!" he shouted. "Gaudartha is a weakling! He abandoned his office as the chief of the tribe, just to become the Beast King's lapdog!"

Fran scowled. "He's a powerful and valiant warrior."

"Ha ha ha! To a weakling like you, maybe! I'll crush you and prove how pathetic the both of you are!"

"Wouldn't have it any other way," said Fran.

Fran, I don't mind you handing this guy his own ass, but you shouldn't do it here. We might end up getting denied entry into the city.

"Hm," Fran agreed. "We'll do this somewhere else."

"Running scared, girl? Hurry up!"

"I don't want to cause a scene."

"Come on! Come at me!" Gwendartha was trying to provoke her.

"..." Fran responded with an annihilation of all facial expression. That meant one thing—rage.

Fran? Maybe you should hold back your battle fury a bit.

I'm fine. I'll kill him in one strike.

Ah, well. There was no stopping her now.

"Ha ha ha! What's the matter? Do you surrender, little girl?"

What the hell was wrong with this guy?! Didn't he sense Fran's battle rage? If he couldn't even gauge his opponents' abilities, he had no place picking fights with them. I didn't want to start our first night in Bestia by beating someone into the ground.

"Don't worry, Black Lightning Princess!" called one of the Red Cats. "The White Rhino started the fight, and we'll testify to that. Go get him!"

Not helping, guys!

I guessed that there was no avoiding the fight now. I raised a Stone Wall around us to protect the other adventurers and stop them from seeing what was about to happen. I got the feeling that plausible deniability would become important.

"Awaken."

Gwendartha winced as Fran entered her Awakened state. Now

there was no way even he could deny what she was. “W-wait, I’m not...”

Too late for any of that, idiot.

“Think fast,” said Fran. “Flashing Thunderclap.”

“Gooorf!”

She pounded Gwendartha square in the abdomen. Electricity crackled down her hand, splitting his armor and throwing him backward with the force of a battering ram. His giant body crashed right through the wall; Fran’s attack left him sprawled out motionless on the ground.

After I went to the trouble of making that Stone Wall...

“All that talk,” said Fran, “and that’s all you’ve got?”

Uh-oh—it looked like her anger had yet to be quenched. She approached Gwendartha slowly and looked down on his pitiful form.

“Who’s the weak one now?” she asked.

“...”

Fran, this guy’s unconscious.

“You’re pathetic,” she told him. “Gaudartha would’ve taken it.”

I mean, I’m not sure it’s fair to compare him to that monster. But what should we do with this guy now?

Fran clearly wasn’t done with Gwendartha. “Wake up.” She delivered a kick to his stomach.

“Hurk!” Gwendartha groaned, but remained unconscious. He stayed that way even after Fran administered a few more rejuvenating kicks. He was out cold.

“All right, come on. That’s enough,” said one of the guards, approaching us cautiously.

“Hrmph.”

“I gotta say,” said the guard, “you really did a number on him.”

Were we about to get arrested? It seemed pretty likely at this point. Fran had taken things a little too far. I scrambled for excuses while the guard splashed Gwendartha with potions.

“I don’t suppose you’d let him off with this, would you?” the

guard asked.

Hang on—this guy wasn't blaming us. In fact, he seemed relieved that we'd put Gwendartha through a wall. That was pretty strange behavior for a guard.

"Why didn't you stop us?" Fran asked him.

"Ah, a beating might do him some good. And he wasn't much trouble for you, was he?"

"Hm. Hardly."

Stop gloating, Fran.

"Great. I know he seems like a piece of work, but Gwendartha has his reasons."

Were we about to get his life story? I mean, I didn't mind. It'd be good to know why he'd picked a fight with us out of the blue like that.

"I knew his uncle when I was an adventurer," said the guard. "He helped me out a lot. I look up to him, and so does Gwen here. He always used to go on about how he'd help Godo be the chieftain of the tribe."

Wow, Gaudartha was next in line to be the chief? I hadn't known he was that well respected.

"But he relinquished the title to Gwen's father so he could join the Royal Guard. Gwen took it hard. He felt betrayed, I guess. Ever since then, he's talked about how he'll surpass Gaudartha."

So, *that* was why Gwen had challenged Fran. If he could defeat someone who beat Gaudartha, that would prove that he was stronger than his uncle. It was shortsighted, but I understood the logic.

"Don't worry," the guard said. "I'll give him quite the tongue-lashing when he wakes up. I'm sorry for his behavior, although I know it's not worth much."

He bowed his head in apology, then lifted Gwendartha with one hand and carried him off. The sight of the slender guard carrying that giant of a man was pretty comical. He was clearly much stronger than he looked. A quick Identify revealed the guard to be a powerful cow beastman, and fairly close to Awakening, if I was any judge of the matter. I guessed that Gwen was about to spend the rest of the night cooling off in a cell.

We should let him off. At least he didn't hurt anyone in the end.

"Hm," Fran agreed. "We killed some time, at least." She seemed satisfied, having had her daily fill of violence.

After that, we made it into the city without any further disruption. I guessed that, if nothing else, no one dared challenge Fran after what she did to Gwendartha. As the gate guards let us in, we asked for directions to the guild, and soon we found our way there. The guildhall was smaller than I expected—no larger than the one in Rose Raccoon.

"Hello," said Fran.

"Good evening!" said the receptionist. "Are you looking for quests? No, I don't suppose so. It's Lady Fran, I presume?"

"You know me?"

"Everyone in the Beastman Nation's guilds knows you," the receptionist said. "And the guild in Argent Lupin let us know via manaphone that you were headed our way."

The Guildmaster of Rose Raccoon had mentioned using similar manatech to get information on the assassin they caught. It seemingly made sense that the guild in the capital was similarly equipped, but it did beg the question...

Why have us deliver a letter?

Rose Raccoon's Guildmaster could've told them about the crisis instantly. A letter seemed like more trouble than it was worth.

Maybe maintaining long-distance communications was difficult? Then, however, I remembered Ulmutt's Guildmaster using the same manatech to hold council with Guildmasters from other cities. That was how Fran got promoted after the tournament. Even foreign branches of the Adventurer's Guild should've had the same equipment.

It was strange, but at least we'd ensured that the letter got here safe and sound.

Fran handed it over. "This is from the Guildmaster of Rose Raccoon."

"Allow me to verify it," said the receptionist, inspecting the seal. "Yes, it's the genuine article, all right. Please wait here."

The receptionist left her desk. When she returned, she led us straight to the Guildmaster's office.

“Please hand the letter directly to the Guildmaster.”

“All right.”

“Guildmaster, Lady Fran is here to see you.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you. You may return to your business.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Guildmaster of Bestia was an aging beastman with fox ears and a tail. “My name is Melos,” said the hunched figure, “the Guildmaster of Bestia.”

“C-Rank adventurer Fran.”

“Ho ho ho,” Melos laughed. “I know who you are. And you are far stronger than the rumors say. You surpass my expectations.”

Melos seemed like a harmless old man, but his eyes were as sharp as knives. *Best not to judge this book by its cover.*

“Here’s your letter.”

“Indeed. Thank you for your hard work.” Melos opened the envelope and quickly scanned the message inside. “I see. Thank you again for delivering this to us. We shall see to it that our princess remains safe. You’ve saved us a lot of trouble.”

“Hm...”

“Oh, what’s this? You look like you have a question.”

Whoa, he noticed that? I thought I was the only one who could see through Fran’s poker face. I’d Identified Melos earlier, out of habit, but hadn’t noticed any mind-reading skills.

“How could you tell?” Fran asked.

“You don’t get to my age without learning a thing or two.”

“Why send a letter when you have manaphones?”

“Ho ho! So, you noticed. I suppose you wish to know our reasons.”

“Hm.”

“Very well. I’ll show you.” The Guildmaster handed Fran the letter.

“Really?” Fran asked.

“Go ahead.”

The letter said that an assassin from Basharl had targeted the princess, and requested an increase in her security detail. At the bottom was a series of numbers—probably a code. The old man never once took his sharp gaze off Fran.

“What’s with the weird numbers?” she asked.

“A code concealing the princess’s location,” he said, “in case the letter fell into the wrong hands.”

Melos proceeded to explain. As it turned out, the manaphones were of Basharl origin, and Basharl was rumored to have developed ways of intercepting the transmissions. Several assassins and spies had been discovered in possession of information only discussed on manaphones, so the threat was very real.

“We have ways of dealing with such interception...but we would have to know Basharl’s methods.”

“And you don’t?”

“No. That is why we consider it better to put grave matters to paper, and employ a fast and powerful messenger like yourself. Then we can be certain the message will be delivered safely. That’s all there is to it.”

“Hm. Okay.”

I’d activated Essence of Falsehood at the beginning of this conversation and had watched Melos closely. He told the truth about the code and the threat of espionage, but he was lying when he said that was all there was to it.

The whole thing stank. The Adventurer’s Guild wasn’t obliged to disclose its motives to anyone; however, I was increasingly worried about Fran being implicated in something shady. I couldn’t tell you what that “something” was, but I was getting paranoid.

Teacher? Fran said, looking to me for guidance. She wasn’t convinced either.

There’s something he’s not telling us.

I’ll ask him, she said.

Sure. If he refuses to explain, we should drop the matter and forget about it. The last thing we want is to make an enemy of the guild.

Hm. Fran turned back to the Guildmaster. “That can’t be all of it.”

Simple, straightforward, and to the point. It turned out that Fran's idea of "asking" was more like a statement.

"Oh?"

"If you wanted the message delivered fast and safely, you could've used a carrier pigeon. What are you hiding?"

"Yes, we have numerous methods of communication at our disposal. But we have our reasons for employing you in this particular instance."

"Which are?"

"I'm afraid those are confidential. They are not for a C-Rank to know."

And that was the end of that.

"..."

"Oh, don't give me that look," said Melos. "Fine, I will tell you one thing. By delivering this letter, you have gained the trust of this country's Adventurer's Guild."

"So, it was some kind of test?"

"No comment. But realize that we were as suspicious of you as you are of us. Especially considering that you have not previously worked in these lands."

It was a good thing we hadn't peeked at the letter on our way here. Melos was telling the truth when he said that he trusted Fran, which hopefully meant that it would be easier to move around the Beastman Nation now.

I understood why he'd been wary of us. The other beastmen we'd met were starstruck by Fran's reputation, but that meant nothing. There was no guarantee that she was a friend of the Beastman Nation.

"I see," Fran said.

"I hope you understand."

"A little, yeah."

"You really did us a favor. I will mark your quest as complete."

"Hm. Thanks."

We took our reward and made our way to an inn the guild recommended. It was the dead of night at this point, but the front desk

was apparently open to adventurers twenty-four hours a day. Fran walked to her room and dove right into bed.

Come on, Fran. Let's get you out of your cloak.

"Unh."

You need a bath, too.

"Hrm."

All right, then. But at least get under the covers.

"Urgh."

She was already half-asleep, so I tucked her in with Telekinesis.

Good night.

"Hmm...zzz."

Three seconds later, and Fran was already in dreamland. She fell asleep as fast as Nobita.

A good night's sleep is just what a growing child needs.

Tomorrow, we would head for the palace. The Guildmaster had even instructed someone to lead us there. Hopefully, we would meet Kiara, the Black Cat who indirectly contributed to Fran's evolution.

What kind of person would Kiara be? I could only hope that Fran would be able to confide in her.

After breakfast the next day, a guild employee showed up at our inn to escort Fran to the guildhall.

When we arrived, they greeted us warmly. "Good morning, Lady Fran."

"Morning."

"You are going to the palace, I take it?"

"Hm."

"Very well. Please wait while I fetch an adventurer to take you there."

Fran sat at the guild counter. As we waited, we looked around to

see the receptionists all occupied with various adventurers.

“So, do you wanna get dinner tonight?” someone asked the girl manning the counter next to us.

“Don’t you have a date with the other girls tonight?”

The receptionists treated the adventurers lightly.

“Whoa, all this can’t be that cheap!”

“Look, you bring damaged goods, we give damaged prices.”

It seemed that Fran was the only one getting VIP treatment. The adventurers muttered amongst themselves, glancing at Fran. Some even tried to talk to her, but the receptionists quickly halted them. I strained to listen to their conversation, and learned that there was an express order from the guild to leave Fran alone.

When one of the guild secretaries brought Fran a cup of tea, we asked her about it.

“Oh, that was a direct order from the Guildmaster. A lot of our members are curious about the existence of an evolved Black Cat, but the Guildmaster told them to leave you be.”

He probably wanted to stop weaker adventurers from getting in over their heads. If they couldn’t discern Fran’s strength, they could end up severely injured.

I silently thanked the Guildmaster for looking out for us. It was a relief not to have to deal with every idiot who came our way, although Fran was probably disappointed by the lack of people to smack down.

Eventually, the receptionist returned. Trailing behind her was our supposed guide, who looked somewhat familiar.

“Gwendartha?” Fran wasn’t good with names, but she wasn’t about to forget his. At least, not after a single night.

“I have been informed of what happened yesterday, Lady Fran,” said the receptionist. “If you do not want him to be your guide, I can get someone else.”

If she already knew what happened, why had she even brought him here?

As I pondered that, however, Gwendartha fell on his face and prostrated himself. Even with his body hunched over and his forehead pressed to the floor, he was still taller than Fran.

"I apologize deeply for what happened yesterday!" Gwendartha bellowed. "I have caused you great grief, Lady Fran!"

What had happened to this guy? He was acting completely different.

"Mere words will not make up for my behavior," he added. "Please allow me to be of service to you."

Is he a fake? Fran asked.

So, even she had her doubts. Still, I didn't detect a shred of hostility in Gwendartha's eyes. He really wanted to help her.

"Did you eat something funny?" she asked him.

"I finally see my faults. Your beating and Brath's scolding convinced me."

"Brath?"

"The gate guard who took me yesterday. He's like a brother to me."

"The cow man?"

"Yes. I've turned over a new leaf. My first course of action is to be of service to you."

All this had happened so suddenly that I didn't know what to make of it. *Are you okay with this, Fran?*

Sure. Don't see why not.

She was never one to hold a grudge, and a good night's rest was enough to wipe away any resentment that might have lingered.

"The White Rhinos are a warrior tribe," the receptionist whispered in Fran's ear, doubtless seeing how skeptical she was. "They pay the utmost respect to anyone who defeats them in combat."

So, they were a race of bruisers who respected brute strength? Good to know.

"Gwendartha is also the son of the White Rhino chieftain," added the receptionist. "I'm sure that status will aid you."

"I'm in your hands," Fran told Gwendartha.

"I'm honored!" Gwendartha said, bowing happily. He might not have earned Fran's trust yet, but now at least he had a chance of gaining it.

“Hm.”

“Would you like to see the sights of the capital before heading to the palace?” he asked. “I grew up in Bestia, and I know all the finest locations.”

“That’s okay. There’s someone I really want to meet.”

“At the palace?” Gwendartha asked, sounding puzzled. I suppose it didn’t make much sense to him. He already knew that this was Fran’s first time in the Beastman Nation. Who could she possibly have an appointment with?

“Hm. Black Cat Kiara.”

“Master Kiara? Very well.”

“You know her?” Fran asked.

“Yes. She trained me as a lad.”

Hunh. Well, Kiara had taught both the Beast King and Gwendartha’s uncle, so I supposed it made sense that Gwendartha got lessons from her too.

“Shall we leave, then?” he asked.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“We’ll be there posthaste!”

Gwendartha beat his chest confidently. At least he knew what he was doing—less than twenty minutes later, we were before the palace gates.

It’s so huge!

We’d already seen the castle from afar, but up close, its magnificence was downright intimidating. Unlike the white castles in the fairy tales back home, this was built from solid black stone. That was fearsome enough, but the castle was also every bit as sturdy as it was intimidating.

The castle walls were as tall as the ones surrounding the city, and just as thick, if not a little thicker. This place looked less like a royal palace, and more like a fortress.

“It was built this way so that it could double as a fortress if the need ever arose,” Gwendartha explained.

He wasn’t wrong that the castle could be used as a fortress. The

moat around the outside of the structure was wide and deep—built for war.

“That’s the entrance,” he said.

“Hm.”

We walked along the wall until the castle gates came into view. They were just as massive and sturdy as the rest of the building, cut through by a drawbridge connecting the city to the castle. Gwendartha went to the guardhouse beside the gate and handed something to one of the guards on duty. It must have been some kind of identification, because after the guard saw it, they let us in.

“What about me?” Fran asked.

“The guild has already vouched for you, Black Lightning Princess,” said Gwendartha. “You could even request an immediate audience with the king, if you desired.”

Fran had won the guild’s trust when she delivered the letter. Now they wanted to win her over. A few days here had proven to us that evolution had tangible repercussions. It was easy to see how gaining Fran’s trust now would profit the guild down the road. Had the Beast King been thinking of that when he gave her his crest? Knowing Rigdith, perhaps not. Even if he hadn’t, however, his vassal Royce certainly had. Still, I wanted to keep the favors we owed to a minimum.

Fran presented the Beast King’s crest to the guard. We were visiting the royal palace, after all. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to demonstrate high-level clearance. After all, who knew what would happen once we got inside?

“Here.”

“Wha...?! Wait a moment, please!” The guard took the crest and passed a crystal over it to determine its authenticity, then politely returned it to Fran. *Very* politely. “Th-thank you so much, ma’am. Let them through!”

Gwendartha looked at the crest with surprise. “To think that you had the Beast King’s crest all this time... You have no need of me.”

“That’s not true,” said Fran.

“I appreciate your modesty.”

Fran wasn’t just being polite, though. The guards would definitely

have suspected us of foul play if we came here alone; maybe they'd even have had us sweat it out in a holding cell for a couple hours while they verified Rigdith's crest. Having Gwendartha with us backed up our claims. The White Rhino tribe must have had political clout to match their physical strength, too, as the guards deferred noticeably to him.

We passed through the gate and found ourselves in front of another large gate.

"More doors," Fran complained.

"The castle is right behind these walls."

"What? Where are we now?"

"Those were the outer walls," Gwendartha explained. "Servants and soldiers live here. Merchants also trade here sometimes. The real castle is beyond these inner walls."

"How do we get in?" Fran asked.

"This way."

Instead of passing through the imposing gates, we followed the inner wall around to the side.

"What about the gate?" said Fran.

"The palace uses it to welcome nobles and other privileged guests. It stays closed the rest of the time."

Entering through the gate was a ceremonial event, and I could see why. It was probably quite the undertaking to open and close something so massive.

We passed servants and merchants and eventually found ourselves outside a less intricate entrance. Again, Gwendartha walked past it, heading for a mansion-like building a little farther on.

"This is where the palace formally accepts its guests," he explained, approaching one of the guards and saying, "We would like to meet Master Kiara. Tell her that Gwendartha and the Black Lightning Princess have come. She is expecting us."

"Very well. Please wait."

The guard led us into a gorgeous room, probably one of numerous others in the mansion. Audiences likely came with long wait times, and I wagered that they wanted to keep their important guests as comfortable as possible. A servant entered with light refreshments, and

Fran quickly devoured them. Gwendartha had an appetite to match his size, too.

“I would expect nothing less for the Black Lightning Princess,” Gwendartha said.

“What do you mean?”

“This room is usually reserved for nobles and other extremely important visitors. Even the refreshments they just served us were of the highest quality.”

Wow. I wouldn’t have known any of that if Gwendartha hadn’t told us. Even Fran watched him with mild interest.





“Please,” Gwendartha said. “I am nothing to marvel at. Remember that I am next in line for the chieftainship. I was exposed to these ceremonies as a child, although I did leave to become an adventurer quite early.”

I hadn’t known that Gwendartha had a noble upbringing. Mind you, I’m not sure anyone would’ve guessed that just by looking at him. Had he become an adventurer to follow in Gaudartha’s footsteps?

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” said a maid, entering the room. “Please, right this way.”

“Hm.”

I thought we’d leave the mansion then, but the maid took us deeper inside.

“Here?”

“Yes.”

The maid knew exactly where she was going. She opened a small door, tucked away in the depths of the mansion. It was ornate, but nothing distinguished it from any others we’d passed.

What laid behind it, on the other hand, was definitely special. Red carpet smothered the floor, and a chandelier hung from the ceiling.

Yes! Finally!

“This is the castle?” Fran asked.

“That’s right,” Gwendartha agreed.

The door leading in from the mansion was probably intentionally left plain, so no one could guess where it led.

“I shall take you to Lady Kiara now,” said the maid.

We followed her on a long, winding walk through the castle, passing several doors along the way. Did Kiara live in the deeper parts of the building?

“We used to meet her on the training grounds of the outer walls,” said Gwendartha. “But her health has failed lately, so she moved to the castle interior.”

“She’s sick? Will she be okay?” Fran asked, worried.

Gwendartha didn’t look anxious. “She is getting old, but I’m sure it’s nothing life-threatening.”

I guess that makes sense. Kiara was close to seventy, by all accounts.

Eventually, the maid stopped in front of one of the rooms. “Right this way.”

“Is this it?” Fran asked.

“Yes,” said Gwendartha. “This is Master Kiara’s room.”

“Pardon my intrusion, Madam Kiara,” said the maid. “Gwendartha and the Black Lightning Princess are here to see you.”

Finally!

“Hm.”

The maid opened the door, and Fran followed Gwendartha inside. The room beyond was exquisite—well furnished without being opulent, lined with embroidered curtains and carpet. A single manalamp hung from the ceiling, covered with ornate glasswork. In the name of tradition, I brushed against a nearby desk to check for dust, but came up empty. Everything was immaculately clean.

A king-sized bed graced the room, and in it was an aging Black Cat. Although she leaned against the headpost, her spine was still ramrod-straight. Kiara was...what, sixty-eight or something? She was thin, and her hair was white, but no one would call her decrepit. She was tall, and imposing, and her eyes were just too sharp.

There was nothing little about this old lady. She had a presence that dominated the room. If I were still human, a single glare from her would have made me crumple, but Fran approached her with no reservations.

“Are you Old Kiara?” Fran asked, with an innocence that bordered on disrespect.

“Hmm? Where did you hear that title?” the old Black Cat asked.

“The Beast King.”

“Hah! I see. That boy needs a good whipping.” There was a masculine quality to the old woman’s speech, but it suited her. “Yes, my name is Kiara. I don’t think we’ve met, but I know that child next to you.”

“Master Kiara,” Gwendartha complained, “I’m twenty-three now.”

“Anyone under the age of forty is a child.” By that standard, the

Beast King was a child, too. I supposed she *had* taught him how to fight. “I was told the Black Lightning Princess would visit me. I take it you are she.”

“You haven’t heard, Master Kiara?” Gwendartha asked.

Surely, they wouldn’t have kept Kiara in the dark about Fran’s evolution?

“Madam Kiara has been very sick,” an attendant informed us. “She was close to death for almost three weeks. She only woke yesterday.”

I noticed now that Kiara’s arms were withered, and her cheeks sunken in.

“Master Kiara,” said the attendant. “This is—”

“Wait.” Kiara beckoned Fran over. “Come.”

“Hm.”

“You can start by telling me your name.”

“Fran. Black Cat Fran.”

“I see...”

Kiara stared at Fran for a long time, her eyes slowly misting over. Then she threw her arms around Fran and held her, softly at first before tightening her embrace.

“Yes!” Kiara said. “I see now!” She squeezed Fran a little tighter. “Fran...thank you.” She let out a sigh that seemed to come from the bottom of her heart, and lowered her voice so that only Fran could hear. “Your very existence tells me...that I have not chased an illusion all my life. It is real!”

“Hm.”

Lumina, the dungeon master in Ulmutt, had reacted in a similar way. After a few more moments, Kiara calmed down enough to let Fran go. She kept a hand on her shoulder, as though she was afraid Fran would evaporate if she released her.

“So, how did you do it?” Kiara asked. “How did you evolve? Can you tell me?”

“Of course.”

“Wonderful!”

“But...” said Fran, “I thought you already knew.”

“And who told you that?”

“Dias.”

“What? So, he still remembers...”

“Hm.”

Dias, the Guildmaster of the Dungeon City of Ulmutt, had told us that the last Beast King kidnapped Kiara after learning the truth about Black Cat evolution. It seemed that Kiara still remembered him, even though it had been decades since they last met.

“How is he now?” she asked.

“He’s the Guildmaster of Ulmutt.”

Step by step, Fran told Kiara everything about Ulmutt, meeting Dias and Aurel, and the dungeon master Lumina. Kiara looked surprised, but happy. Perhaps she’d thought Aurel and Dias had forgotten her after all these years.

“Dias said that some bad people went after you because you figured out how to evolve,” said Fran.

“I see. That isn’t the whole truth. Let me tell you my side of the story.”

Kiara began by explaining to us what had happened in Ulmutt. She’d still been looking for a way to evolve when she first arrived there. Eventually, she met Lumina, and the two grew close. Finally, Lumina proclaimed that she would help Kiara evolve.

To achieve that goal, however, Lumina ended up turning herself into a Fiend. In the distant past, the Black Cat tribe had become half-Fiends when they received the grace of the Evil One. Although Lumina had not partaken in that atrocity, she was left with the stain of Malice, and had used that—coupled with her authority as a dungeon master—to completely transform into a Fiend. Since Kiara had Malice Sense, she’d realized what was happening.

What did any of this have to do with Kiara’s evolution?

“It was then that I remembered an old manuscript I’d once read,” said Kiara. “I had gathered many documents in my quest to discover why Black Cats could not evolve. This particular parchment was torn in half, but the part that remained told how the Black Cat tribe incurred the wrath of the gods, and how the curse could be broken if the tribe

defeated the Evil One or his servants. At first,” she continued, “I did not know whether it was true. It could have been a fictional account, written to give us hope, or falsified by an enemy in an attempt to send us to our deaths. In any event, I was not willing to sacrifice Lumina for a chance at evolution, so I stopped her.”

I figured that explained how Kiara knew about evolution without knowing the exact details.

“The most I could make of it,” she said, “is that we need to kill a certain number of Fiends.”

“I see.”

However, Kiara had no way of confirming whether she was right, and no idea how to undo the curse for the entire tribe. Those were probably the only reasons the previous Beast King had let her live. A single Black Cat could never hope to bring down the Evil One by themselves, after all. Even if word somehow got out, it was doubtful anyone would dare try breaking the curse—and if they tried and failed, it might plunge the Black Cats deeper into despair. Kiara, being painfully aware of this, had kept her theories to herself.

“So, was I right?” she asked.

“Hm. Partly.”

Fran proceeded to explain the requirements of evolution to the best of her ability.

“You need to kill Fiends—”

“I see—”

“Alternatively—”

“Hmm—”

It was strange to hear Fran talk this much at a go. She must really have wanted to share everything she knew with Kiara.

“And that’s all of it,” she said.

“I see...I see.” Kiara folded in on herself and trembled.

I thought she was crying, but it turned out to be something else.

“Heh heh heh...ha ha ha!” She threw her head back and bellowed with laughter. Her eyes burned with joy. She turned to her attendant. “Mia! Fetch me my sword!”

“Uh, Master Kiara?” Gwendartha asked sheepishly.

Kiara ignored him. “Don’t just stand there, girl. My sword!”

“Master Kiara, please!” said the girl. “Don’t be rash!”

“Do you expect me to remain calm?! Worry not. I am only going to kill some goblins!”

“But you were treading the border of life and death just yesterday!” the attendant protested.

“I can kill goblins when I’m half-dead, child!”

Kiara was already halfway out of her bed, despite Gwendartha’s attempts to restrain her. She knew what she had to do to evolve now, and there wasn’t a force on earth that could stop her.

“To think that I should awaken the day before Fran arrived to bring such wonderful news!” she said. “It is truly the hand of Fate.”

However, Gwendartha was still worried. “Master Kiara, you’ve already lost your Favor!”

“Perhaps, but I have no intention of giving in! Now, out of my way, child!”

“Please, be reasonable!” he protested. “Achieving this goal would be difficult for you even with the Favor!”

“Favor?” Fran asked.

“I suppose you haven’t heard,” said Kiara. “You see, Fran, I possessed the War God’s Favor for a long time.”

War God’s Favor? Nope, still couldn’t make any sense of it. Although, looking at everyone’s faces, I guessed that I was the only one.

“Wow!” Fran exclaimed.

“I grew much stronger under its influence,” said Kiara. “But it is with someone else now.”

Fran’s eyes sparkled with admiration. If even she knew about it, it really must be quite important.

What’s this War God’s Favor thing? I asked.

It’s a really famous skill.

The War God’s Favor was a well-known Extra Skill, prominently spoken of in folklore. It allowed the user to level up her skills faster,

and increased the stat gain earned from leveling up. The skill even added to your stats automatically. It sounded pretty strong, but there was another reason for its notoriety—to retain the skill, its owner had to expose themselves to a life-threatening battle at least once a month. Failure to meet this requirement meant that the skill passed on to someone else.

No wonder people wrote stories about the War God's Favor.

"I received it when I was seven," said Kiara, "and fought every month of my life in order to keep it. Unfortunately, I lost it around ten years ago."

"How'd that happen?" Fran asked.

"My body failed me. I was hospitalized for almost six months."

Back when Kiara was a slave, the former Beast King sent her to a nearby Haunt at least once a month. It was the smart thing to do; having a slave with an Extra Skill was a tremendous asset.

"But that's all in the past now!" said Kiara. "Heh heh heh...my blood longs for the heat of battle!"

She had trained for decades in the hopes of evolving one day. Now that she knew how to achieve it, she was already cooking up plans.

"We must go to Schwarz Katze," she said, "and tell the tribe of the news."

"I think the news was delivered while you were asleep, Master," said the attendant.

"Well and good," said Kiara. "But we should still go. If nothing else, we can enlist others willing to go Fiend-hunting."

"Schwarz Katze?" Fran asked, tilting her head.

"It is a village of the Black Cat tribe, founded by the current king," Gwendartha explained. "Black Cats who were freed from slavery live there in peace."

That sounded like a place we should definitely visit. But what about Kiara? I suspected the old Black Cat would be more than happy to keep us company, but one of the people present stopped the old fighter from rushing to go with us.

"You must not overexert yourself," said Mia. "Not now."

“Curse you, Mia!”

“I implore you to rest for at least another week.”

Kiara might not have been evolved, but she was still pretty strong. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d actually been stronger than some evolved beastmen in her prime. Yet Mia had her pinned down.

“Let go of me!”

“I will not.”

Wow, this Mia girl was crazy strong.

“I suppose this is the power of the royal maids,” said Gwendartha.

“They’re that famous?” Fran asked.

“Yes. The maids serving the royal family and their privileged guests are an elite force, trained from an early age. Their fighting prowess is matched only by their immaculate housework.”

So, Mia was not only evolved, but also highly trained.

“I wouldn’t stand a chance against them,” added Gwendartha.

“Ooh.” They must’ve been *really* strong.

“I take it you were not born in the Beastman Nation, Fran,” said Kiara. “What will you do now? Will you remain in the capital?”

She was trying to divert Mia’s attention, but she wasn’t very good at playing sly.

“Perhaps,” said Fran. “I came here to see one other person, beside yourself.”

How much could we even tell Kiara about the Godsmith? Our secondary quest was highly confidential, which was why Fran was being so vague.

The sudden shift didn’t go unnoticed. “A person you can’t tell me about,” said Kiara.

“The Beast King instructed me to ask one of his officials.”

“Very well. Then I’m afraid I cannot be of use to you. I hold no official title, despite the fancy room.”

“What are you saying, madam?” Mia asked. “There isn’t a soul who would dare go against your word.”

“And yet you have me pinned against my will, Mia. Does that

mean you will let go of me?"

"I will not." This attendant was taking none of Kiara's nonsense. "But you have plenty of students across the land. His Highness and his daughter, the elite guard and their generals...and that's just to name a few."

"I regret teaching them so well," Kiara complained. "If I had gone easier on them, they wouldn't be capable of standing in my way now."

"My condolences, madam. You should be more careful in administering your wisdom."

"Tch! Ack! Cough!"

"You see? Your spirits might have lifted, but your body has not yet recovered."

"Urgh," Kiara grumbled, conceding Mia's point.

"Also," Mia went on, "the reason you don't have an official title is because you keep refusing them. You could be an honorary commander in chief by now, if you wanted."

Kiara might have been a slave of common birth, but she had come to hold influence over the whole country. That made her more powerful than most politicians.

"Enough," said Kiara. "Send for one of those higher-ups, Mia."

"As you wish."

Mia unfurled a bit of parchment, wrote something on it, and handed it to the maid outside the door. I guessed that it was probably a summons.

"I'm afraid this is all I can do to express my gratitude," Kiara said. "But feel free to ask me for anything you desire. I shall do my best to grant it."

Fran only shook her head. "That's okay. I'm not doing this for a reward."

"Ha ha ha! Good answer!" said Kiara. "I like you. But allow me to do you some small favor, at least. Surely it is normal to do such things for people we like. How about it? Is there anyone whose head you would like to see on a platter?"

"That's fine. I'd rather put it there myself."

“Would you, now? Yes, I see your point. That is much more thrilling.”

“Hm.”

Fran and Kiara were off to a rolling start. I supposed that I shouldn't be surprised; Dias had mentioned how much Fran reminded him of Kiara. The two battle-hungry Black Cats were a match made in heaven. They happily chatted about combat until someone else entered the room.

“Madam Kiara, you sent for me?”

An aging, silver-haired man made his way inside. He was dressed in some kind of official-looking robe, but Kiara addressed him casually.

“Took you long enough. There's someone I'd like you to meet.”

“Indeed? Aaah, so this is the Black Lightning Princess?”

“You know her?” Kiara asked.

“Of course. You were the only one who missed the news, madam.” The man turned to Fran and bowed. “His Highness made it known that we are to treat you with the utmost respect. I hear that you would like a letter of introduction written on the Beast King's behalf?”

“Hm,” said Fran. That was our best way of contacting the Godsmith.

Fortunately, this man seemed happy to provide the letter. “I shall do anything that I can to help you,” he said.

“Hm. So, who are you?”

“Goodness, I've misplaced my manners. My name is Raymond, prime minister of the Beastman Nation.”

Prime minister? Wow, he really was important! And modest, too. I liked him already.

“Raymond worked his way up from the lowest office of the nation,” said Kiara. “He's pretty good at his job.”

“Though I must admit, the previous Beast King didn't like me very much.”

No, I guess he wouldn't have.

“C-Rank adventurer Fran,” Fran introduced herself. “People call me the Black Lightning Princess.”

“I am aware. Here is the letter you requested. Is there anything else you need?”

Anything, Teacher?

I can't think of anything. What about you?

Just one thing.

Really? What is it?

I want to go to the Black Cat village.

Sure, that's a great idea. Let's ask him where it is.

Hm!

“I want to go to Schwarz Katze,” Fran told Raymond.

“Oh, I was about to ask whether you could do that. Excellent. I shall prepare a map for you immediately.”

“Thanks,” said Fran.

“Think nothing of it.” Raymond bowed out of the room.

Kiara told Fran to sit back down. She had given up on the prospect of Fiend-hunting for now, deciding to enjoy chatting with Fran instead. Jet piqued her interest, so we had him expand to his original size. Kiara responded by petting the direwolf from chest to tail.

Half an hour later, before we knew it, Mia intervened to remind Kiara that she needed to rest. The maid was no physician, but then again, she probably had more authority than one. Although Kiara would have kept us here several more hours if she could have, it was clearly time for us to go.

In the end, Mia relented and allowed Kiara to see Fran off at the gates.

“See you, Gwen,” said Fran.

“Goodbye,” said Gwendartha. “I apologize again for last night.”

“Hm. It's okay.”

“I'm so sorry.” Gwendartha bowed his head in apology.

Kiara watched him, intrigued. “Did anything happen that I should know about?”

“Nothing, master,” said Gwendartha. “It's just—”

“Gwen picked a fight with me,” said Fran, ignoring Gwendartha's

attempts to change the subject.

“Did he, now?” After that, Kiara made Fran tell her the whole story. When she was done, Kiara sighed. “Gods, are you *still* not over your beloved uncle?”

“Beloved uncle?!” Gwendartha spluttered. “I don’t miss that traitor one bit—”

“And *this* is why you are still a child. I can’t believe you’re going through puberty in your twenties. You know you’re the only living White Rhino to consider Godo a traitor? Everyone else realizes what a great honor it is to become the Beast King’s guardian.”

“I...”

“You’re just sulking because your beloved Uncle Godo didn’t consult you before relinquishing his claim to the White Rhino chieftainship,” Kiara said.

“Urgh.”

“Heh. But never mind the child for now,” said Kiara, throwing her arms around Fran. “Promise me that you’ll come and visit again.”

“Hm. Only if you don’t push yourself too hard, Kiara.”

“Ha ha ha! That will be impossible! I have to evolve now!”

“Hm. Well, as long as you don’t die, then.”

Kiara was too old for evolution to make any real difference to her, but that wasn’t the point. It was a goal she had fought for her whole life. One she would pursue at all costs. I really hoped that she wouldn’t kill herself trying. I couldn’t imagine how much that would upset Fran.

“I never thought I would experience such fulfillment in my old age,” said Kiara. “You have my deepest gratitude.”

“Hm.”

“Aah, I can’t wait to get back to cracking Fiend skulls! In fact—”

“Madam Kiara, you mustn’t excite yourself. It’s bad for your health.”

“Why are you here, Mia?! Let go! You said you’d let Gwen look after me!”

“I did, but I had a feeling this would happen, so I followed you.”

“Urk...!”

There was no getting anything past Mia! These royal maids really were something else.

After that, Kiara tried to talk Fran into staying so that Kiara could train her. It was a wonderful offer, and it sounded like a good life, but Fran politely declined. After all, we still had to keep our promise to Garrus, the dwarven blacksmith. We had to search for the Godsmith, then return to Granzell to find him. Equipped with the letter of introduction from Raymond, we could safely set out to locate him—but not before stopping by Schwarz Katze.

“I’ll be going now,” said Fran.

“Safe travels!” Gwendartha shouted after us.

“I’ll never forget this debt, Fran! Be well! You too, Jet!” We left the castle with Kiara’s blessings.

That was nice.

“Hm.”

Let’s come back sometime.

“Hm!”

With that, our business in the capital was settled. I suggested that we sightsee, but Fran couldn’t wait to get going.

We left the palace and headed out of the city. Our next destination was Schwarz Katze, which lay to the north. This worked out pretty well, because according to what we’d heard, the Godsmith’s hermitage was also in that direction.

Good thing we have this map, I said. Schwarz Katze is pretty hard to find.

The village was in the mountains along the northern border. If worse came to worst, we could always approach it by air. The road was long and arduous, but Jet could cover the distance in a day or two.

Let’s make for Green Goat, I suggested. It’s a good hub city to stop by.

Sitting at the nexus of numerous important roads, Green Goat was an important commercial hub for the kingdom.

“Can’t wait,” said Fran.

You can say that again.

“Let’s go, Jet!”

“Awooo!”

Chapter 3: The Black Cat Habitat

ENCOUNTERING NO PROBLEMS on the road, we reached Green Goat by nightfall.

“Y-you may pass, Black Lightning Princess!”

“Hm.”

We entered the city without so much as a hiccup and visited the guild to sell materials from the small monsters we killed along the way. From there, it was only a short walk to the inn. I should have been relieved that things were going so smoothly, but in truth, it felt weird. Was this the calm before the storm? I watched for any sign that something was amiss in Green Goat, but everything seemed normal.

While Fran slept, I watched over her nervously, vigilant for the first spark of an emergency. However, morning dawned, and all was still peaceful. I appreciated the rest, but I couldn't believe this was happening. It was unprecedented.

“What is it, Teacher?” Fran noticed my restlessness, but I didn't want to bother her about it.

It's nothing.

“Really?”

I expected something to happen as we headed out the city gates, at least, but somehow we left Green Goat without a single incident. Was our luck changing for the better?

That was a really nice town!

“You think so?” Fran asked.

Yep! All towns should strive to be like Green Goat!

Then, of course, something happened just after we left the city.

“Someone's there,” said Fran. We were only about twenty meters beyond the city gates.

Adventurers?

The two men waiting on either side of the road looked like adventurers. They weren't doing anything, but I guessed that they were looking for someone.

Even the most brazen bandits had the sense to rob their victims farther from the city, so I decided these guys must be after something else. When we noticed that they were watching us, we slowed down and kept our guard up. Once again, however, nothing happened.

As we got closer, I noticed that these adventurers were human. Maybe Fran and Jet's oddness just caught their attention, but that didn't explain why they suddenly glared daggers at us.

What's up with them? I asked.

They're watching us.

Sure looks like they're itching for a fight.

The men let us pass. A short way farther down the road, though, several others appeared out of nowhere. They scowled, closing in on us.

If they were bandits, they certainly had a strange way of going about their business. Most bandits were just plain greedy. Anger wasn't usually part of their particular brand.

"We finally caught up to you," said one.

"What's with that wolf?!" asked another.

"It's too fast!"

The adventurers were on horseback and shouted angrily as they approached.

"You Fran, the Black Lightning Princess?" they asked.

"Hm."

So, they were specifically targeting us. I guessed that the two just outside the city gates were lookouts after all. They must have posted men along every road in and out of Green Goat.

"Sorry," panted one, out of breath from chasing Jet, "but you're going to die now."

"Blame the fact that you're an animal!"

Well, that escalated quickly! I thought it would come to this, but the adventurers really weren't ones to waste words. They were oddly confident, despite the fact that they were so weak.

I prepared Teleport and Telekinesis, just in case the men were using something like Fake Identity. They had underestimated Fran, though, which was a clear sign that they were as weak as they looked. Even so, Fran and I were still riding Jet, a giant direwolf. The men's confidence didn't make sense, especially when it looked as if goblins could beat them within an inch of their lives.

The men took some kind of balls out of their pouches, grinning as they held them in the air.

Fran, those balls are manatech. They produce a weak poison gas. I'll teleport you out of here. Jet, you take them down. But leave the leader alive.

"Arf!"

The men threw the poison balls, and Fran immediately disappeared. They looked around for her, but never bothered to look above themselves. From up in the sky, I surveyed our surroundings, looking for other accomplices; I could only spot these five guys and their two sentries.

Below us, Jet ignored the poison gas and tore right through their ranks. *Guess they were exactly as weak as they seemed.* When we landed, Jet wagged his tail in anticipation.

"Good boy," said Fran.

"Arf!"

"Hm."

I checked the men's condition as Fran cooed over Jet like she was Mutsugoro-san. Three of the five adventurers were dead, and the remaining two were minutes from death. I quickly healed them. Not as an act of mercy—I wanted information.

"What are you playing at?" Fran asked them.

"Eek...!"

"Th-this isn't how it was supposed to go down!"

With the application of a little pain and Intimidate, the men opened right up. Unfortunately, they didn't know very much. They were little more than anti-beastman thugs, and an unknown man had hired them. He supplied them with manatech he claimed would release powerful poison—poison that would only kill their enemies. They still seemed shocked that it hadn't worked, but I got the feeling the man had

used and discarded them.

I had no idea why this unknown man sent these pushovers to make an attempt on Fran's life. Maybe he was just out to harass her? Even the most basic knowledge of Fran and who she was would have told the men that such tricks couldn't kill her. Had their employer expected them to fail?

In any case, it was best to return to Green Goat and hand the two survivors over to the authorities.

I knew it...

"Teacher?"

N-nothing. Don't worry about it.

Fran might have become the target of some unknown conspiracy, but I felt strangely relieved that something had finally happened. Not that I was going to tell her that.

"What about the conspirators along the other roads?" Fran asked.

If they're still around, we'll nab them.

"Got it."

And so, we returned to Green Goat.

"Umm, didn't you just leave earlier...?" the guard asked, confused.

It was true; we'd passed him only thirty minutes ago.

"Something came up," Fran said.

The guard turned his attention to Jet. "Did it have anything to do with the men who are beaten half to death and tied up on top of your direwolf?"

"Hm. I was attacked in the middle of the road."

"A-are you hurt?"

"Nope."

"Of course she's not hurt, idiot!" said one of the other guards. "The Black Lightning Princess can easily handle a few thugs!"

"R-right, of course."

"I didn't think we got bandits around here now," said the other, rubbing his chin. "I thought His Royal Highness wiped them out last

year.”

Fran shook her head. “They’re not bandits. They wanted to kill me specifically.”

“A-assassins?”

“Hm.” She showed the poison balls to the guards and told them the story.

“By the gods! Pl-please wait while I call for the captain! Hey, we need backup over here!”

“On it!”

Wow, these guys worked fast! Maybe it was just because Fran was involved, but backup arrived from the guardhouse within a few minutes. The guards carried the would-be assassins away and threw them in jail.

The guard captain showed up with them in a state bordering on panic. He reminded me of the Rat Man from a certain manga about youkai. In fact, as it turned out, he really *was* a rat beastman. That aside, his conduct was perfectly sincere.

“Are you hurt, Black Lightning Princess?!”

“Hm. I’m fine.”

“Very good.” Once he confirmed Fran’s safety, he turned to his men for the full story. “Well, where are the thugs now?”

“In prison, sir!”

“Excellent. Now, make them talk!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Right this way, Black Lightning Princess.”

The captain led Fran into the guardhouse and sat her down in what looked like a waiting room.

“Fetch the best refreshments for our honored guest.”

“Immediately, sir.”

Soon, a guard provided Fran with a very fine cup of tea. That seemed normal enough, given how things were going, but then someone else came in with a thick cut of steak that couldn’t under any circumstances have been described as a “refreshment.”

Was the captain joking with us? Nope—he looked deadly serious. What’s more, Fran didn’t appear surprised at all, but picked up the steak immediately and stuffed her face with it. I guessed that this counted as afternoon tea here in the Beastman Nation. It was an interesting glimpse into their culinary customs, at least!

Fran had almost finished her steak when I sensed someone coming up the stairs. Their footsteps were quite loud and frantic, but at least they had the manners to pause in front of the door and knock—even if their knocking did sound like it would break down the door.

“Come in,” said Fran.

“Hello! Aah, are you the Black Lightning Princess?”

“Hm.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance! Allow me to introduce myself! I am Green Mountain Goat Almarno, viscount of Green Goat!”

Whoa, no need to shout, buddy! Almarno was muscular, and most certainly did not look like a herbivore. Between his build, his armor, and the sword hanging from his belt, he was definitely a fighter.

“What’s the situation, Captain?” he asked.

“We’re interrogating the thugs as we speak, my lord.”

“Basharl’s behind this, I just know it!”

“I agree, sir. And we have all the proof we need!”

They had proof? Had I missed something?

The guard captain turned to Fran. “The manatech they used is Basharli,” he said. “There’s no mistaking it.”

“Make them talk, and don’t let the mastermind get away!” Almarno shouted. “How dare they attack the Black Lightning Princess, a champion of our kingdom?! This is as good as a declaration of war!”

The guard captain nodded.

Wait, Fran is a champion of the Beastman Nation now?

“Indeed, sir!” the captain told Almarno. “I’ve already assigned soldiers to the location where they attacked the Black Lightning Princess.”

“Excellent, Captain! And what of the investigation in the city?!”

“Our men are sweeping the areas thugs normally frequent.

Unfortunately, most of our forces are away, reinforcing the border with Basharl.”

“Again with Basharl! Very well. Add the knights to their number!”

“Are you sure, my lord? The castle guard...”

“I am very sure, Captain! If Basharl wants to fight, we’ll give them a fight!”

It seemed unlikely that their investigation would yield much fruit. It seemed more and more likely that those adventurers were sent to harass Fran, not kill her. Whoever had employed them definitely knew they would get caught, and he was likely miles away by now. Still, I supposed, the guards might find some further proof that Basharl was involved.

Almarno asked Fran whether she was staying in town until the investigation was over. He even offered her one of his mansions, to make sure that we had somewhere comfortable to reside, but Fran declined. The viscount seemed a little upset not to have further chances to win the favor of the famous Black Lightning Princess. To give Almarno due credit, he was probably just trying to pay Fran the respect that she was due. He asked her to have lunch with him and tell him about her brave travels, but Fran was in too much of a hurry.

“I’m sorry, but it will have to wait until another time.”

“Of course!” Almarno shouted. “You are welcome here whenever you like!”

He accompanied us to the gates, and we were off on the road again.

Fran, I know it says to head straight north, but I think we should take a detour.

“Why?”

There might still be people following us, and we don’t want to lead them to the other Black Cats.

“Good point.”

Jet, go east instead of north from here.

“Woof!”

We carried on eastward, making our way through a forest. We teleported around and hid ourselves before finally returning to the road

north. If we had anyone on our tail, we had lost them by now.

“Did that do it?”

Probably.

Chances were that no one could keep up with us, especially considering how fast Jet was, and the fact that we were actively concealing our presence. Any assassins who could track us down now had every right to challenge us to a fight.

“Is that the river the Green Goats mentioned?” Fran asked.

Looks like it.

“Woof woof!”

Arriving at the river meant we’d already reached the halfway point. Schwarz Katze should be right around the corner. Wow, we’d covered a lot of ground. Jet really enjoyed putting the pedal to the metal when he had the chance.

“There’s the fork,” said Fran.

The folks in Green Goat said to go right after the river.

“Woof!”

I expected Jet to slow down, but he didn’t. He cornered like he was drifting.

Now just follow the road, and we should—

“Teacher, over there!”

There we go!

Along the steep, narrow path that led to Schwarz Katze, we spotted several beastmen. I checked their ears and tails, and they were definitely the ones who we were looking for.

Black Cats!

“Hm!”

We’d found our first villagers! They carried bundles of branches on their backs, so I guessed that they were gathering firewood. We hurried on, powered by our excitement, but things did not go as planned.

“Eeek!”

“Direwolf!”

“R-run!”

The villagers dropped their firewood and ran into the forest the second they saw Jet. I don't think that they even noticed Fran. They didn't try to make a stand. I guessed that that was what happened when you were well known to be the weakest tribe.

Maybe...we should have asked Jet to shrink down a little bit? Either way, we had to find the villagers now, if only to clear up the misunderstanding. We didn't want the others thinking there was a feral direwolf roaming around.

Let's go after them and explain ourselves.

“All right.”

Back to the shadows with you, Jet.

“Arf...”

We collected the abandoned bundles of firewood and headed into the forest. The Black Cats had scattered in three directions—I assumed they were more than used to escaping threats that way.

Let's find the nearest one.

“Hm.”

Our target was an ordinary man, not a seasoned warrior. It didn't take long for Fran to track him down. Sure enough, a few moments later, we noticed him shivering under a tree.

“Hey,” said Fran.

“Eek!” The Black Cat shrieked and jumped out of his hiding place. His face was pale with fear. When he noticed Fran standing in front of him, he immediately fell on his rear. “E-e-e-e...”

“Hm?”

“E-e-e-e—”

“You all right?”

“Evolved!”

“Hm.”

The other tribes already treated Fran like a national hero, but the members of her own tribe were truly shocked. The man's eyes were full of awe and astonishment. He trembled so much I thought he might pass out.

“B-b-b-b-b...”

“Hm?”

“B-b-b-b—”

“Is that your impression of a chicken?”

“Black Lightning Princess?!”

So, the news had reached them after all. Not only did he realize Fran was evolved, he knew that she’d achieved the rarer form of the Black Sky Tiger. Tears streamed down his pale face.

“Waaaaaaah!”

“You okay?”

“After all the misery we’ve been through! Finally! Waaaaah!”

Let’s wait a while, I suggested.

Sure.

Fran’s gaze softened as she comforted the man. I hadn’t seen her like this since Inina; she clearly felt a stronger bond with members of her own tribe.

We watched over the man until he calmed down and apologized for his behavior. “I am deeply sorry for causing you so much trouble, Black Lightning Princess.”

“That’s all right.”

“Th-thank you so much!”

When he’d recovered, we set off in search of his two friends. Once we found them, they reacted in a similar way. They were completely overwhelmed by emotion, but after they calmed down, they trusted us quickly—like they were alley cats who’d finally found their boss.

They treated Fran like a celebrity as she gave them back their firewood, their eyes gleaming with admiration. Then we all headed for Schwarz Katze.

“I’ll go tell everyone you’re here!” one villager said, speeding away.

That was a good idea. After all, we didn’t want to cause a fuss if we didn’t have to.

“Oh, yeah,” said Fran. “I have a friend with me.”

“R-really?”

“Hm. Do you mind if I call him?”

“Not at all!”

“Jet.”

“Awooo!” Jet emerged from the shadows, and the men immediately fell back on their rears.

“Gaaaah! Wolf!”

“Eeek!”

Evidently, Jet was still terrifying, even in his shrunken state. We reassured the Black Cats as best we could and resumed our walk to the village.

“I’ll warn the rest about your familiar, so you don’t scare them,” said the second man, taking off in the direction his friend went.

“Thanks,” said Fran.

She chatted with the remaining young man as they walked the rest of the way. According to him, about three hundred people lived in Schwarz Katze, and ninety percent of them were Black Cats. Soldiers and adventurers from other races, as well as their families, made up the remaining population.

“Oh, there it is now!” the young man exclaimed.

“That’s Schwarz Katze?”

“Yes!”

A tall wooden wall blocked the end of the path. We might’ve been out in the middle of nowhere, but this village was decently fortified. Apparently, the wall was a special gift from the Beast King himself. I figured Rigdith really did care about the Black Cats, even if that was just an extension of his affection for Kiara.

Three Black Cats were at the gates. Two were the men we’d encountered before, while the last was an old man with a hunched back. He was different from the others. If nothing else, he didn’t even look at Jet. Instead, he turned all his attention on Fran.

“Ooh...! Ooooh...! You really *are* evolved!” The old man looked Fran up and down with tears brimming in his eyes.

“We told you, elder!”

“Yes, but I still could not believe it!”

“The Beast King’s own messenger delivered the message!” one of the others protested.

“Even so, did any of you believe it? Truly? A hundred percent?”

“Well, I mean...”

“You know...”

They couldn’t wrap their heads around it. To them, the idea that one of their own could evolve was simply impossible.

And here was Fran to prove them wrong.

“S-so,” the elder stammered, “the requirement for evolution...is it true?”

“Y-yeah!” said one of the others. “Do we really have to beat a thousand Fiends?”

“It sounds impossible!”

I guessed that it would be a while before we could have a reasonable discussion.

At least they’re happy about it, I said.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

A few minutes later, everyone had calmed down enough to show us the village. They apologized for their earlier outbursts, but Fran just seemed pleased about how happy they were.

When we entered the village, a huge crowd waited for us—almost two hundred people, most of them Black Cats. They muttered to each other when they saw Fran, but the atmosphere was more sedate than I expected. The villagers were so astonished that they could barely make a sound.

“Thank you, gods...”

“So, it was true.”

“Oooh...”

Without warning, many villagers fell to their knees—their hands clasped to their chests, and their eyes brimming with hot tears. It was an intense reaction, bordering on worship. Fran seemed almost as

perturbed by it as I was.

“Come now,” said the elder. “Calm down. You’re making the Black Lightning Princess uncomfortable.”

The crowd eased off after that, although their gazes remained intense.

“My apologies, Black Lightning Princess,” said the elder.

“Hm. It’s okay.”

As soon as Fran spoke, another wave of murmuring ran through the crowd.

“She talked!”

“And she has such a cute voice!”

“She’s cute!”

“Like a goddess...”

Wasn’t all this a little over the top? The villagers were treating Fran more like a pop star than a war hero.



“Please,” said the elder. “Right this way.”

“Hm.”

He led us away, but the masses followed behind us. There were children in the crowd around Fran’s age, but none even tried to speak to her. At first, I thought they were afraid, but the looks on their faces were more like intense admiration. Their eyes practically sparkled.

The elder led us to his house and asked Fran to sit down while he prepared a cup of tea for her. I could feel the villagers swarm around the house. Some even peeked in through the windows.

“I apologize that I do not have anything better to serve you,” said the elder, handing Fran her tea.

“Hm. It’s good.”

“Is it really?! I am very happy to hear that.”

The village elder patted his chest with relief. Outside the walls, the villagers gasped. I wondered what would have happened if Fran hadn’t liked the tea. Would they have made her another cup? Judging by what I’d seen so far, they might have gone off to nearby towns in search of different tea leaves.

“I cannot tell you how much it pleases me that you like it. We cultivated these tea leaves ourselves, you see.”

Ah. Well, I supposed that explained it.

“So,” said the elder, “what brings you to our village?”

“Nothing. I just heard that Black Cats lived here, so I wanted to visit.”

“Goodness, is that so?!” the elder asked, nodding happily. “Ours is a small village, and I am afraid that we do not have an inn. Please, make yourself at home here for the duration of your stay.”

“I can camp out for a few days.”

“Not on my watch, Black Lightning Princess! Please, I insist!”

The elder bowed his head so low it smacked the table. This guy needed to calm down! That looked like it hurt.

“Are you sure?” Fran asked. “Thanks.”

“If you need anything, please do not hesitate to ask.”

He was treating Fran like a noble. She might have been evolved, but she was still of common birth; the village elder held a higher office than her, if anything.

“We are a simple village,” he said. “But we shall provide for your needs as best we can.”

There really wasn’t anything we wanted from them, however. Quite the opposite, in fact.

“You should tell *me* if you need anything,” Fran said. “I’ll help any way I can.”

“Will you? Thank you so much.”

“Any trouble with monsters lately?” she asked.

“Not really. There are few monsters in these parts of the world, and we live in peace. The land isn’t particularly fertile, but at least it’s safe.”

The cool climate made the area unpopular with other beastmen. They were by and large a battle-hardened race who didn’t mind living cheek by jowl with monsters, if it meant warm climates and fertile soil. They definitely didn’t envy the Black Cats living in Schwarz Katze, which was probably why the Beast King gave them this land so readily.

“There is one thing you can help us with,” said the elder.

“Yes?”

“May I trouble you to show the young ones your power?”

“You want me to fight?”

“Yes. I doubt that older Cats like me can kill a thousand Fiends in the sunset of our lives, but the young ones are different. They might have what it takes to evolve. I would like them to see what they can expect from evolution.”

The Black Cats were rejoicing at the news that one of their own had finally evolved, but such excitement could be short-lived. How many would be driven to hunt down enough Fiends to evolve themselves? Judging by the Black Cats we had seen so far in the village, the answer was: not many.

“I see,” said Fran. “All right.”

“So, you’ll do it?!”

“Hm.”

We were still talking about our plans when a ruckus broke out somewhere in the village. Someone banged on the elder’s door, and others shouted. What was going on?

“Elder! Elder, are you there?!”

The voice was frantic. Was there some kind of emergency?

“Keep it down! What’s happening?”

“G-goblins! We have goblins incoming!”

“Why all the fuss?” asked the elder. “The guards will take care of them.”

“I-It’s a horde! More than twenty!”

The elder’s eyes widened. “Wh-what?”

“They’re resting, but they’ll be on the move again soon. They might come to our village!”

The elder broke into a cold sweat. Twenty goblins might not be many, but it was enough to demolish a small village. “Tw-twenty goblins, you say?” he asked.

“It’s the end for us!” These guys had given up hope.

Fortunately, Fran already had an idea. “This is the perfect chance to show you my powers.”

“O-of course!” exclaimed the elder, his eyes suddenly brightening. “Will you save us, Black Lightning Princess?”

“Hm. Pick the ones you want to come with me.”

“V-very well! I shall do that immediately!” the elder said, rushing out of the house.

A short time later, Fran left the village followed by almost thirty Black Cats—each nervously clutching a weapon. All were grateful to Fran for saying she would deal with these goblins, but none were prepared to witness the fight firsthand. The very thought made some of them go white as sheets.

Surely, they must have *some* combat experience? After all, they lived close to the northern border with Basharl. I nudged Fran to ask about it.

“We’re exempt from military conscription,” said one of the

villagers.

“Don’t the other beast tribes complain about that?” Fran asked.

“Well, Black Cats aren’t very useful on the front lines.”

“We’ll just get in the way,” said another.

“Even if we signed up, we’d drag everyone down.”

“We do make great living shields!”

“But that’s in the past. The current Beast King forbids such inhuman tactics.”

“So, really, there’s nothing left for us to do at this point.”

The Black Cats were so used to being called useless and weak that they’d come to accept it as the truth. They’d effectively defanged themselves. I’d thought that more of them would want to evolve, but it seemed as if Black Cats like Fran and Kiara—who were born outside the Beastman Nation—were exceptions. The ones born and raised here had long resigned themselves to their fate.

Not all of them, though. A young Black Cat girl among the raiding crew frowned as she listened to the men explain away their weakness.

A Red Dog soldier accompanying us gave a wry smile. “We other tribes don’t even complain about the Black Cats’ lack of contribution to the battlefield.”

“Really?” Fran asked.

“The previous Beast King used the Black Cats as slaves and cannon fodder. When the current Beast King changed all that, he changed our minds as well.”

“Uh-huh.”

“At this point, it seems best that the Black Cats don’t go into battle.”

The Red Dog didn’t seem as if he were trying to belittle the Black Cats. It was just that their weakness was a matter of fact to him. In the heat of battle, there was no way they could be anything but a burden.

The girl who’d frowned earlier, irritated at her tribe’s collective spinelessness, seemed to take offense at this. “We’re going to change that someday!” she cried.

“Very good,” said Fran. “Uh...?”

“My name is Salutia, Black Lightning Princess!”

“Hm. Very good, Salutia.”

The Red Dog gave another wry chuckle. “Changing that will be hard to do. The other tribes aren’t going to change their minds overnight. Though I must admit, you’re already shaking things up, Black Lightning Princess.”

Fran sighed with disappointment.

We walked along the trail until we came to a rocky outcrop where the goblins were sighted. This whole place was a vast wilderness, dotted with patches of gnarled trees. I’d thought that the presence of vegetation might mean the soil was fertile, but whatever these trees were, they sucked all the nutrients out of the earth, leaving it dry. As much as the citizens of Schwarz Katze wanted to cultivate this land, they just didn’t have enough manpower to fell all these trees. So far, they’d only managed to clear a few small patches for their farms.

Farther north, the rocky wilderness gave way to luscious green and fertile soil, but living conditions were harsh in those lands—monsters roamed there freely, and the winters bit right through your skin.

Twenty minutes north of the village, we happened upon the goblins.

“Over there!”

“Hrm.”

We slipped under the shadows of a rock formation that, on Earth, would have made for a popular tourist destination. It provided a good vantage point to observe the goblins.

Just as the scout reported, there were twenty, but by now they were on the move—heading due south toward the village. There was something strange about them. Feral goblins were usually equipped with nothing more than a loincloth and a club; at best, they might live long enough to poach some leather armor from any unfortunate adventurers they killed. But these goblins wore *metal* armor. The only goblins we’d ever seen garbed like this were the hobgoblins we’d fought in the dungeon, and we hadn’t heard anything about a dungeon like that in these parts.

“It looks like they got some equipment off some mercenaries,”

said our guide.

“You think goblins defeated a group of mercenaries?” Fran asked skeptically.

The guide shrugged. “There might be more of them somewhere. Besides, there’s always a chance that they scavenged the armor from people who were already dead.”

“I see.”

The goblins’ armor *did* seem pretty uniform. I supposed it was possible that they’d poached it from a band of mercenaries or a squad of soldiers.

Either way, they’re still goblins. And I don’t sense any more around here. They shouldn’t be a problem.

“Hm,” said Fran. “I’ll go ahead. The rest of you just watch for now.”

“Woof!”

Jet had managed to win our companions over on the way here, and they all seemed relieved to be under his protection. As weak as Black Cats were, even they could see that a direwolf was stronger than a handful of goblins.

“I’ll be back soon,” Fran told the group.

“A-all right.”

“Be careful.”

“W-we’ll stand watch!”

She jumped down, emerging from the shadow of the rocks. Concealing her presence, she slowly snuck up to the goblins. Of course, chances were that she was still moving too fast for the other Black Cats to follow. We could’ve cleared out this whole pack in a little under five seconds, but that would have missed the point of this encounter. We had to take things slow, and make sure to show off Fran’s powers.

“Awaken—Flashing Thunderclap!”

Already?

“It’s cooler this way.”

I suppose coolness is important.

“Hm.”

The more awesome Fran looked, the more admirers she would get. Admirers who, hopefully, would aspire to evolve just like her.

“We’ll start with melee,” said Fran.

Sure.

The goblins had noticed the cracking thunder and were already glaring at Fran, but their pathetic attempts at intimidation did nothing to slow her down.

“Haaa!” Fran brandished me in the air and cut through the goblins as she fell to the earth. We moved slowly, but then, our idea of “slow” was still too fast for our spectators to behold. They could only watch in stunned silence as three monsters collapsed.

Catching on to the fact that Fran was a force to be reckoned with, the goblins rushed her all at once. Surprisingly smart, for Fiends. Fran avoided their attacks with ease. To the others, she seemed to dance in tune with her black lightning. Three more goblins fell, throwing the others into a panic. We must have killed their leader.

Should we use magic next?

“Hm. Something flashy.”

You got it!

We cast fire spells to block the goblins from fleeing. Where flashiness was concerned, nothing beat a well-placed Tri Explosion—a loud bang, followed by a fireworks display. In the aftermath, charred goblin parts rained on the ground. That was sure to wow our Black Cat audience.

At that point, the goblins went into a full-scale retreat, but we weren’t about to let them escape. We had to protect Schwarz Katze, and besides, Fran wasn’t done showing off her powers.

“Stun Bolt. Stun Bolt. Stun Bolt.”

“Gyaaaoooh!”

“Gyoaaa!”

The chain of thunder spells paralyzed the remaining goblins without killing them.

You’re not going to finish them off?

“Hm. The Black Cats are going to kill them.”

I see.

Hopefully, it would give the cowardly cats some confidence.

Let's bring in our audience, I suggested.

"Hm."

I only hoped the others were fierce enough to finish the job. They seemed to have misplaced their feral instincts, but I figured that we wouldn't know until we tried.

"H-how did it go, Black Lightning Princess?" they asked, approaching cautiously.

"Perfect. Come here. All of you."

"V-very well."

"All right."

The Black Cats obeyed. When they saw the mass of goblin corpses, they grew much more enthusiastic.

"W-wow!"

"This is amazing!"

"Being evolved gives you so much power!"

They were definitely impressed—though whether it awakened their own desire to evolve remained to be seen.

The Red Dog was a professional soldier, and much calmer in the face of the carnage Fran had wrought on the goblins. Still, his wagging tail betrayed his admiration. "I never doubted you for a second, ma'am."

In contrast, it didn't take too long before the Black Cats' enthusiasm disappeared.

"Aieeee! This one's still alive!"

"Huh? Whoa, you're right!"

"Gyaaa!" A Black Cat shrieked when he noticed a goblin's chest moving, and the rest went suddenly pale.

"Take your weapons and stab it," Fran said.

"Huh?"

"You're all going to kill these things."

“What?”

“Why?”

“I-Is there a reason to?”

“Builds confidence,” said Fran. “You can get used to killing Fiends by killing goblins.”

Salutia was the only one who drew her weapon and stepped forward, glaring down at the goblin.

The other tribesmen were much more reluctant. They hadn’t dropped their swords and fled, but they hesitated. I guessed that this was the first time they’d used their weapons for anything more than hunting or self-defense.

Of course, Fran was having none of it. “Their paralysis will wear off if you don’t hurry.”

“Eek!”

“You three. Come on.”

“No, but...”

“I-I didn’t think we’d have to start *today*.”

“Y-yeah!”

The three youngsters stayed where they were, making excuses. I doubted they were Fiend-sympathizers—probably just unused to wielding weapons—but Fran remained merciless. She was the child of wandering adventurers, and had been sold into illegal slavery as a little girl. She never hesitated to kill an enemy. If anything, she’d rather be safe than sorry.

“No,” she said. “We do it now.”

“But—”

“Hm. The paralysis is wearing off already.”

“Eek!”

“Better hurry up.”

“Okay!”

Salutia looked scared, but she swung her weapon. That was a good sign. Leagues ahead of the men still spluttering excuses, anyway.

“Taaa!” She brought down her sword and made a small gash in

the goblin's stomach. Not bad for a little girl. At least she hadn't held back.

"Good job, Salutia," said Fran. "You three. Go."

"I didn't think I'd be doing this today!"

"B-but we have to!"

"C-curse this!"

The three men grasped their weapons and brought them down timidly on the goblin. Their strikes were so weak, I could have sworn they just bounced off the goblin's hide, but you could put it down to their lack of Weapon Skill and motivation.

The goblin twitched in response to the light smacks, and all three villagers shrieked like schoolgirls and ran. Hey, at least they were good at that. They were *really* fast!

"Put your back into it," said Fran.

"B-but..."

"Once more. Like this. Hup." Fran mimed a killing strike.

"A-all right..."

"Uhhh..."

"I hate this!"

Motivated by desperation and Fran's unyielding glare, they brought down their weapons harder. This time, they aimed for the goblin's stomach and head, whacking it repeatedly for good measure.

"Huff! Huff...!"

"Well?"

"Did we do it...?"

The goblin's corpse was a mess, but adrenaline stopped them from losing their lunches. The same could not be said for some of the others, who really had come along to watch. They covered their mouths and heaved.

"Good job," said Fran. "You killed your first goblin."

Excited by their first kill, the three let out an elated cry. "Yeah!" Of course, they still had a long way to go, and Fran made sure to remind them of that.

“It took ten strikes from the three of you to finish off a goblin. You have to be able to kill something this weak in one strike.”

“O-oh. I see...”

“Of course.”

“We got a little ahead of ourselves.”

“But not bad for your first try,” said Fran. “With a bit of training, you’ll be slaying goblins in no time.”

“Thank you, ma’am!”

With that expert application of carrot and stick, Fran won their complete devotion. They already practically worshiped her; now, she bordered on cult-leader status. Regardless, she’d managed to seed them with a spark of confidence and the desire to evolve. Whether they had the commitment to see it through remained to be seen.

“You’ll be a good fighter with some practice, Salutia.”

“Really?”

“Hm.”

“Thank you very much!”

“Next three.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

Fran talked the remaining Black Cats through killing their first goblins. I thought the next lot might hesitate too, but they stepped forward much more readily. I figured they knew what to expect now. Some even leveled up by the time we were through, fanning the flames of their enthusiasm. They were already talking about how they wanted to train as soon as we returned to the village.

“Hm. Let’s head back. There are no more monsters nearby.”

“All right. What do we do with the bodies?”

“I’ll keep them for now.”

Fran stored the goblins’ remains in her Pocket Dimension and led the way home whilst the Black Cats talked excitedly among themselves. They discussed all kinds of crazy ideas: where they could find more Fiends to kill, if they should move closer to the capital so they could see more action, even whether they should cross the border to Jillbird to find some more monsters to kill. Their motivation was reassuring, but I

couldn't help worrying. If they actually acted on any of these plans, they'd get themselves killed. Had we done *too* good a job of getting them enthused?

Fran, maybe we should stay longer, so we can train them.

Fran shook her head. *We'd miss the capital auction.*

Sure, but I'm worried about these guys.

No. A promise is a promise.

Garrus set the appointment in a letter, I said. I don't think it's binding. Still.

Well, if you say so.

Fran was adamant. She could be quite stubborn when she wanted to be. I suppose that was part of her charm.

When we made it back to Schwarz Katze, the Black Cats enthusiastically recounted the events to the tribesmen. They boasted about Fran's powers and the fact that they took part in killing the Fiends.

"Thank you, Black Lightning Princess."

"No big deal."

"Ah, but it is an *immensely* big deal to us. You have no idea how proud we are to call you our kin. Thank you again."

Fran nodded, then laid out our unexpected spoils for the day: the equipment the goblins had worn. Some was in pristine condition, but we had no use for it. Besides, it would make greenhorn adventurers very happy.

"Do you want these?" she asked the villagers.

"Err, what do you mean?"

"I don't need them."

"S-so, you're giving them away? You could fetch a pretty penny by selling them."

"Yes, but still pennies. I've got enough coin saved up."

"Then we gladly accept! We can use this to equip our young people."

"In that case, have these too." Fran dumped our entire equipment

stock out of her Pocket Dimension.

“Good gods...!”

We’d amassed the equipment by killing goblins, robbers, and pirates all across the land. The guild didn’t purchase equipment, unlike monster materials, so we would have had to visit a blacksmith to sell it. Even then, we wouldn’t have made much, so we ended up hoarding it until now.

Most of the equipment was unusable in its current state, but not beyond repair. Even the completely broken stuff could be smelted down for raw material.

“I don’t need any of this,” said Fran. “I’d appreciate it if you could take it off my hands.”

“W-we would be delighted!”

“Thanks.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Fran.

The elder grew misty-eyed at her honest generosity. “My people! Not only has the Black Lightning Princess protected our village, she has given us her armory!”

“Ooooh!”

“She’s so generous!”

“Wow!”

“Tonight,” said the elder, “we celebrate with a feast!”

“Yeaaaaah!”

The villagers scattered almost right away to prepare. They hardly lived in the lap of luxury, so I really didn’t want to impose, but we couldn’t refuse.

Can’t wait, said Fran.

“Woof!”

I only hoped that those two had already tempered their appetites.

Night fell, and Fran’s welcoming party began.

“To begin,” the elder called out, “a word from our guest of honor! Black Lightning Princess, if you please?”

“Hm...?”

Just say “cheers,” I suggested.

“Hm. Cheers.”

“Cheers!”

Everyone raised their glasses and chugged. Fran finished her juice. That must’ve been how they toasted in this part of the world.

Fran sat at the head of the table with an entire feast laid in front of her. We’d expected the village to clear out their storehouses, but times were hard and this year’s harvest was meager, so we ended up contributing meat and vegetables from our own storage. We’d collected a whole kaleidoscope of ingredients over the course of our travels, and were able to supplement the village’s stocks with sliced fish, eggs, rice, and assorted flours for baking. The villagers had reservations about using our supplies, but Fran convinced them that they were doing us a favor by clearing out her Pocket Dimension.

The women of the village even taught Fran their secret to delicious stews. While there wasn’t anything special about the stew ingredients, the Black Cats used a strange kiln to cook them. It was spherical, with thick walls, and functioned as a sort of space heater while it cooked. Somehow, it softened foods over a short period of time. Maybe it worked something like a pressure cooker.

The women threw everything into the strange kiln—meat and tubers alike—and tossed in some seasoning and cooking vinegar. A short while later, out came delicious, melt-in-your-mouth Black Cat Stew. The vinegar had a slightly oily quality, so it probably tasted quite similar to Japanese stews. I was already concocting my own improvements to the recipe so I could make it for Fran in the future.

In exchange for their secrets, we told the villagers how to make delicious broth from bones and vegetables.

As the party went on, the villagers passed dish after dish of good food around the table. While the drinks flowed, everyone praised Fran’s abilities, which soon escalated into songs and dances offered to the gods. People sang off-key, and moved in ways that I wasn’t sure even the gods would understand. As the night wore on, a crowd gathered

around Fran, each member wanting to thank her personally. She spoke to them all, but the crowd only thickened as the night progressed, if anything.

You doing all right, Fran?

Hm. I'm fine.

Honestly, she looked happy. I supposed that made sense; this was a dream come true for her. She was right in the thick of an entire crowd of Black Cats, laughing and rejoicing. Fran remained stoic as ever, but I could see that she was glowing.

It would have been nice if she could have settled down here, but there was no changing her mind. In a few days, we would be on the road again. The best we could do was enjoy the company of the tribesmen while we were here.

The day after the festival, Fran woke up earlier than usual. She had breakfast and took a walk around the village. As she went, everyone bowed their heads to greet her. Some older Black Cats even knelt in reverence as she went past.

This village is so idyllic, I said.

“Hm. So many farms.”

The villagers here cultivated the land for a living. They got most of their meat from merchants and didn't hunt much, if at all. These feline beastmen were mostly vegetarian.

I was a little worried about some of the weaker youths' chances of survival. The older Black Cats had combat experience, even if just as meat shields and cannon fodder under the previous Beast King, and possessed military training. But the younger generation had never seen combat. Other than the cats who'd come goblin-hunting with us yesterday, I didn't think many even *wanted* to evolve.

Fran didn't seem particularly worried, though. She was a Black Cat herself and understood her race's weakness. I saw problems in the short term, but she knew that she wouldn't change their minds overnight. It might take years, or even decades, before another Black

Cat evolved.

“There is one thing I want to do for them,” she said.

Which is?

“Teach them to learn magic.”

I see.

To evolve, the Black Cats needed to max out their level and kill a thousand Fiends. To reach the higher evolution of a Black Sky Tiger, they also needed high Magic and Agility, as well as the ability to use Thunder Magic. They could train their Magic and Agility themselves, but Thunder Magic was difficult to learn. It required high levels of Fire and Wind Magic, as well as an affinity for Thunder.

Still, not all was lost. Some cats would certainly pick Thunder Magic up if they started young enough. All we needed to do was teach them how to train.

I think it's a good idea. Amanda had taught us the basics. With a bit of practice, we should be able to pass that information on.

Fran set about looking for the elder, and found him in a serious conversation with some of the youths. “Morning, Elder.”

“Good morning, Black Lightning Princess.”

“What’s going on?”

“Oh, these young people wish to train, but they don’t know how.”

“W-we want to get stronger!”

“I don’t know if I can evolve, but I’m sick of running away.”

“We at least want to be strong enough to defend ourselves...”

So, our little display yesterday hadn’t been a complete waste.

Fran nodded with approval. It was good to see the young Black Cats motivated. “That’s great,” she said. “Perfect timing, too.”

“Will you train them?” asked the elder.

“Something like that. I’m going to teach you to use magic,” Fran told them.

“Truly?!”

Magic was a lost art to the Black Cats. Most had never, even in their wildest dreams, thought they could learn to wield it. The youths

looked delighted, but also skeptical.

“Will we really be able to use magic?”

“Maybe,” said Fran. “If you have the affinity for it.”

“Aaah, I see.”

“Hm. Affinities for Fire and Wind should be common enough.”

Black Cats had an inherent affinity for Thunder Magic, judging by their exalted stage of evolution, so most should already have affinities for Fire and Wind.

“Is there anyone here who can already use magic?” Fran asked.

“None, I’m afraid...”

Shame. This would have gone a lot faster if we had someone to help propagate magic through the rest of the village.

“Can you call another gathering?” Fran asked the elder.

“Y-yes!” he stammered. “I’ll summon everyone immediately!”

“Wait...oh.”

Fran was about to tell him to wait until everyone was done in the fields, but the elder was already out of earshot.

Ten minutes later, around two hundred Black Cats sat on the ground, watching Fran expectantly. The elder had brought everyone who could be spared. Salutia sat front and center.

Fran scanned their faces.

They look motivated, at least. Maybe they can do this.

“Hm,” said Fran. “I’m going to teach you how to use magic now.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“First, Fire Magic.”

She explained everything she’d learned from Amanda. The Black Cats needed to use fire day in and day out—be near fire, look at fire, touch fire, let it burn them. If they filled their minds with fire until it appeared in their dreams, they’d be in a good place to start using Fire Magic.

The Black Cats slowly fell silent as they listened to Fran. All the usual excited murmurs stopped. As motivated as they were, perhaps this was too challenging for them.

When no one so much as cleared their throat, the elder spoke. “So, if we train like that, we can use Fire Magic?”

“Hm. If you’ve got the aptitude for it.”

“Very well,” the elder nodded. “We shall build a training area immediately.”

The villagers looked more determined than ever. *Impressive*. Fran didn’t even need to explain further; they simply took her words as truth. They trusted her with their lives.

“Now, Wind Magic,” Fran continued.

The further she got into her lecture, the more excited everyone was. All that was left was to put things into practice. With no time to waste, the Black Cats gathered torches and fans.

“Ow ow ow!”

“You’re going too hard, Salutia.”

“It’s fine! I’ll burn myself if that’s what it takes!”

She was too close to the fire, and she scorched her hands, but she was right. You needed to be a little reckless to learn Fire Magic. We let her continue under our supervision.

We didn’t bother covering Water and Earth Magic for now, although some Black Cats were bound to have affinities for them.

Then I realized something just as important. *Don’t you need Mana Manipulation to use magic?*

Amanda had said that Mana Manipulation made magic easier to learn. Could these Black Cats manipulate mana when they didn’t even know what it felt like? Even if the flames and wind were naturally imbued with mana, it seemed like that would make it harder.

We need to figure out a way for them to learn Mana Manipulation.

Any suggestions? Fran asked.

Let me think...

We spent a while discussing how to pass on the skill.

“Uh-huh... Elder?”

“Yes?”

“Hm. Come closer.”

“Very well.” The elder did as Fran asked, and she held her hand over him. “Wh-what’s this? I felt something strange...”

“Hm. I moved your latent mana with mine.”

It had worked! Fran had used her Mana Manipulation to unsettle the elder’s mana. It wasn’t dangerous; Fran had done just enough for him to notice.

“Did you feel that?” she asked.

“In a way...” said the elder, getting quite excited. “I could certainly tell something was happening!”

“Hm,” said Fran. “That’s magic.”

“I see!”

“Get everyone else in line.”

“Very well! Come, everyone!”

The Black Cats lined up calmly in front of us. Fran and I gently agitated everyone’s mana to teach them how it felt (to the Black Cats, it seemed like Fran did all the work, of course). It took us some time to cover everyone, but it wasn’t like we had anything better to do. I didn’t know how much this would help, but it had to be better than not knowing what channeling mana felt like at all.

“We cannot thank you enough, Black Lightning Princess.”

“It’s nothing,” said Fran. “Really.”

“But it *is* something! Not only have you shown us the way to evolution, now you are teaching us magic! I cannot explain our gratitude!”

Magic was usually a well-kept secret—its techniques passed down from master to apprentice, only ever shared with the worthy. Here Fran was, however, sharing her secrets with her whole tribe.

As magic training progressed, some Black Cats raised questions about swordplay, so Fran gave them a short lecture on Sword Mastery. She taught them how to hold a sword, how to swing it, and the best ways to build up the necessary muscles. It was a good thing she’d taken the time to teach those newbies on the voyage to the Beastman Nation. That teaching experience was really coming in handy here.

At this point, the Black Cats would probably have appointed Fran village chief in the blink of an eye if she asked. The elder would

probably have begged her to take his place.

“We would love it if you could stay a few more days to teach us,” he said.

“I’ll be gone by then,” said Fran.

“Of course...”

See! He practically *was* begging her to take his job! When she refused his request to stay, the Black Cats’ collective disappointment was palpable.

“But you can ask me for anything while I’m here,” she said.

“Ah, if only we could!” the elder cried, falling to his knees.

I was impressed by how calmly Fran dealt with all the adulation. She’d been quite perturbed when we first arrived at Schwarz Katze, but she adjusted fast.

Before we were done with our lessons, though, something else occurred.

“E-Elder!”

“Hrm. What is it?”

The Red Dog guard rushed into the town square in a panic. “The goblins are back!” he cried.

“Again?! How many?”

“Ten of them. Something strange is going on!”

“Indeed. To have so many goblin sightings in such a short period of time...”

Goblins multiplied like rabbits if you let them, so this actually didn’t seem that strange to me. I had Fran ask about it, and the villagers told her that the area wasn’t known to be a Fiend breeding ground. Yesterday was the first time many youngsters here had ever seen a goblin. Running into a whole group of goblins two days in a row was markedly abnormal.

“There might be a horde somewhere,” said Fran.

“Indeed. And if they have a King...”

“They’re going to multiply. We have to find their cave.”

An entire horde of goblins could wipe Schwarz Katze right off the

map. Good thing Fran was around to take care of things.

“I’ll go look, Elder,” she said.

“Y-you’ll help us again?”

“Hm. But I can’t take anyone with me this time.”

“I understand. We would only get in your way.”

The elder thought it would be too difficult for Fran to protect the villagers and fight a horde of goblins at the same time. However, we had our own reasons for wanting to go solo. We needed to move fast, and that meant using skills like Air Hop. We couldn’t afford any stragglers.

“Where’s the horde?” Fran asked.

“The same place as last time,” said the guard.

“All right,” she replied. “Call back everyone outside the village, and make sure that no one leaves.”

“Affirmative!” barked the guardsman.

I appreciated his professionalism in times of crisis. At least we could count on him to protect the town while we went goblin hunting.

“I’m off,” Fran said.

“Fare thee well!”

“Hm.”

I misheard what the guard said as “fail well,” which didn’t seem like a very nice thing to say. Especially considering that we needed to hurry up and find that goblin nest.

I hope we can locate it fast, I fretted.

“Hm.”

We left the village and concealed our presence, heading for the rocky plains.

Teacher, said Fran. *How do we find the nest?*

We could try sensing the goblins’ presence. Or following one of them to it.

I see.

Let’s split up so we can cover more ground. Sniff ’em out, Jet! A goblin cave should’ve stunk more than enough for Jet’s nose.

“Woof!”

As for us, Fran, let's go bust some goblin skulls!

Hm.

Be sure to let some escape, so they can take us to their base.

Got it.

Sure enough, the goblins were in exactly the same place they'd been yesterday.

What are they doing? Fran asked.

Hmm...

Resting? she suggested.

I don't think so. They're acting weird, actually.

The goblins seemed to be looking for something, and they wore very similar equipment to the ones we'd killed yesterday. In fact, their gear was *exactly* the same. Were they from the same horde? A quick Identify revealed them to be weaker than the goblins yesterday, and there were fewer of them, too. Maybe these guys were the lackeys? Still, I had never seen this many goblins in matching equipment. And in such pristine condition, too!

We approached, watching the goblins carefully. These guys were *definitely* looking for something. They turned over rocks and examined bloodstains on the ground, being strangely thorough in their investigation.

The main horde probably have elites with them, I said.

Hm.

We *had* to find the goblin nest now. If we killed the leader of this group, the rest of the pack should scatter and lead us straight to their nest.

We'll kill seven of them, I said. *Including the leader. Let three survive.*

Okay.

Here we go!

“Hm!”

Once we'd formulated our plan, I teleported us right into center of the pack. Fran cut down the leader with a single slash, massacring the

others around him with her swing-through. Only the sound of their comrades' dead bodies dropping to the ground alerted the others to Fran's presence. The remaining goblins panicked.

"Gyao?"

"Gyagya!"

"Too slow," said Fran.

Two goblins charged at her frantically, but I blasted both with a flame spell, burning them into cinders. The remaining goblins turned to look at the falling ashes, finally realizing that they were the only ones left.

"Gyohiii!"

"Gyoheeee!"

"Hyohiii!"

I couldn't speak goblin, but they were definitely screaming in terror. They turned tail and ran, and we concealed our presence again to follow them. We needn't have bothered—they never looked back even once. One was so terrified that it urinated.

Ew, said Fran.

How dare they expose Fran to something so revolting?! I'd burn them and their excrement to ashes!

Eventually, the adrenaline wore off and the goblins slowed down, thinking they'd given us the slip. Still, the gruesome memory of what Fran did to their dead kinsmen drove them on. They moved cautiously, even stopping to share a waterskin between them. It made them seem almost human.

I couldn't get over how strangely intelligent these goblins seemed. Even the ones I'd encountered in the Demon Wolf's Garden would drop whatever they were doing to play and nap and eat.

Over there, Teacher.

Is that their base? I knew it. Elites. I counted the horde at about one hundred strong, including Goblin Fighters and Goblin Thieves.

Fran pointed to something. *There.*

And a Goblin King! There he is!

The King was normally holed up in a cave, but he was out in the

open. I guessed that he came out to get some fresh air. Lucky for us.

They all wear the same equipment, said Fran.

I was losing faith in the scavenged-from-mercenaries theory, but I couldn't think of any other explanation.

Doesn't matter, said Fran. *They'll all be dead soon.*

Can't argue with you there. As soon as we killed the goblins' king, the rest would be no smarter or stronger than any normal goblin.

The three survivors approached the horde and shouted at the Goblin King—probably telling him about how Fran had killed their friends.

Looks like he's taking it well enough.

Once the king heard the survivors out, he called his fellow goblins to him. It seemed like he was about to organize another search party.

Let's fence them in so they can't get away, I suggested.

Hm. Good idea.

Thunder Wall! Thunder Wall! Thunder Wall!

"Thunder Wall! Thunder Wall!"

This spell, as the name implied, created a wall of lightning, shocking anyone who came near. Although it wasn't powerful by itself, it was very useful for hemming foes in. We charged our spells with additional mana so that they covered more ground. Soon, five walls of electricity fenced in all the goblins.

"Gogyaoooo?"

"Agyaga!"

The king remained calm and ordered his goblins to attack the walls. A Goblin Soldier swung his axe, but jolted immediately backward. He fell to the ground, not quite dead, but definitely incapacitated.

Then we delivered the death blow, raining lightning down on them from above. When the Thunder Walls finally faded, goblin carcasses littered the ground.

That's all of them. Let's get some crystals while we're at it.

"Hm."

The thunder spell did a number on their equipment, but I think we can still use some of it.

“I’ll store it,” said Fran.

Yeah. The villagers will appreciate it.

Fran even leveled up, having received a decent amount of experience from that encounter. A hundred goblins was a good hunt.

Level 46. Good job.

“Hm!”

I knew that Fran’s level cap had increased when she evolved, but it was always nice to see concrete proof. She was going to get so much stronger. I was sure she’d be a match for the Beast King himself one day.

I bring you news, Your Highness.

“This better be good, General. I hope you have not summoned me in the middle of the night for nothing.”

Of course, my lord. Our Beast Exterminators have engaged the animals and are now locked in combat.

“Yes, I was informed. Have there been any unfavorable developments on the battlefield?”

The animals...are offering heavier resistance than we anticipated. They managed to bolster their numbers and are now in the thousands.

“I see.”

The odds are still in our favor, my lord.

“‘Still,’ you say?”

It will be difficult if our enemies grow more organized. We have the advantage in numbers, but the animals are far more savage in combat. It is only a matter of time before they overcome our forces.

“And what of our plans to sow unrest in the Beastman Nation?”

We cannot execute those plans at present. We need every man on the front lines. Diverting our resources would cause grave losses.

“Even so, you understand that we cannot retreat. Not after we have declared our intentions to the neighboring kingdoms.”

Of course, my lord. I ask your permission to call upon our allies. They might not win the battle, but they may buy us some time.

“Very well. See to it. This is a golden opportunity. The Beast King is away from his nest, and the slayer of the Tyrant Sabertooth has retired. We shall sacrifice whatever we must for the glory of our nation.”

It shall be done, my lord!

“Have the animals caught on to the true nature of our plans?”

They have not, sire. Our spies report that the princess is visiting the southern battlefield to boost morale. They still think the front lines are in the south.

“I see. The animals must not discover our northern front, you understand? We must draw their attention as far south as possible.”

About that, sire...is it...

“Everything proceeds as planned. I received word that they are on the move. The signal should go out in a few days. Have patience.”

Yes, my lord!

“I have sold my soul to them...for the glory of my beloved Basharl.”

Your Highness...

“I would rather serve the Evil One than bow to mere beasts.”

Chapter 4: The Northern Threat

AFTER ELIMINATING the goblin horde, we surveyed our surroundings, hunting for stragglers, but none were to be found. We didn't find their cave, either. Given the number of goblins we'd killed, I expected a vast cave system. Even the less intelligent goblins in the Demon Wolf's Garden had a decent-sized cave, and a horde this large could easily have excavated one of their own.

Where did they all come from?

With no answers to speak of, we headed back to the village. On the way, we spotted a chickendeer and decided to hunt it down. It would make a nice treat for the villagers. The animal bolted as soon as it sensed our presence, but it couldn't outrun Jet. He tracked it down and killed it.

When we returned, the Black Cats welcomed Fran with great rejoicing. They had seen the lightning flashes from afar, and gasped in surprise when they learned that Fran had the ability to call down lightning from the heavens.

"I did not think you could control the weather like that!"

"No wonder they call you the Black Lightning Princess!"

"So cool!"

The villagers got even more excited when Fran produced the chickendeer.

"Wow! You even killed that monster deer!"

"You're the best!"

"Marry me!"

"I got this for you," Fran said. "Eat it."

"M-may we really have this?"

"Of course."

"Th-thank you ever so much!"

The elder bowed his head, and his people did the same. Killing a chickendeer almost seemed to earn their respect more than killing all those goblins. The chickendeer was a strong monster in these parts, despite only being an F-Threat. It was fast, and its horns were also more valuable than its Threat Level indicated. Villagers often carved the horns off and sold them for a sizable profit.

“You can have this, too.”

“Again, Princess? But there’s so much!”

“Hm.” Fran gave the elder the goblins’ equipment. The intense heat of our thunder spells had melted some of it, but most was still salvageable. The Goblin King’s armor was made of metal, and was mostly still intact, but the Black Cats would have to get stronger before they could use it.

“This one’s sturdier than the rest,” Fran said.

“Aah, indeed. It certainly is of higher quality.”

“W-we shall give it to our fittest villager!” stammered the elder, tears pouring down his face.

That night, the village held another feast. This one lacked the frenzy of yesterday’s celebration, but the villagers still talked enthusiastically about their magic and swordplay training. Fran’s four-meter-long chickendeer roast was the main dish, and there was more than enough for everyone.

“If you please, Black Lightning Princess.”

“Hm.”

“Give this a try, too.”

“Munch...munch...”

“And some tea.”

“Slurp...”

The women tended to Fran as she sat at the head of the table, bringing her delicious tea and an assortment of food. It looked as if they were bringing offerings to their goddess.

“Come, Princess.”

“You may have this, Princess.”

“Oh, Princess!”

At some point, they had started calling her Princess. Fran allowed it, since the Black Cats had good intentions, and it wasn't like they were making fun of her. I wasn't about to argue. After all, Fran was certainly adorable enough to be a princess! In fact, I was willing to bet that she was more adorable than the princess of the Beastman Nation herself! Not that I'd met her yet.

"We thank thee for thy gifts of armor this day."

"I'm just unloading my stuff on you," Fran said.

"Even so, this is a great boon to us. We shall send our people to the neighboring villages to get the equipment repaired right away."

"You don't have a blacksmith here?"

"No, madam."

Apparently, the local blacksmith had passed away several years ago, and left behind no heirs or disciples. With no blacksmith, the Black Cats had to visit other villages for repairs. It might take some time before they could use the gear we gave them.

Teacher?

Yeah?

We have to do something about this.

Hmm... I had been using my Blacksmith Skill to conduct maintenance on myself, and now would be a good chance to put it to use again. Good idea. Let's fix some of this equipment up for them.

After the feast was over, we asked the elder to take us to the forge.

"This is the smithy," he said.

"Hm."

The last blacksmith had lived some distance from the main village.

"Are you sure you do not require help?" the elder asked.

"I'm fine," said Fran. "I have my secret skills too."

"Of course! Then we shall leave you to it. We have cleaned the place up for you," said the elder. "Feel free to use it as you see fit."

The forge was attached to the house, and it still seemed usable. "Thanks," said Fran.

“Come now, Princess! We should be thanking you instead!”

When the elder left, we got down to work.

Let's start by making some ingots.

We started by sorting the goblins' equipment into piles. We'd already given the Black Cats the stuff that needed only minimal repairs. We divided the remainder into what was salvageable and unsalvageable, then began repairing salvageable stuff and breaking everything else down into its raw materials.

I'll look after this, I said. You can get some sleep if you want, Fran.

“I'm fine.”

Are you sure? I guess we could work on some parts together.

“Hm.”

We happily smithed away until Fran was too tired to continue.

The next morning, I was clanging with my hammer when I noticed a sound that wasn't metallic. It was a knocking—on the door, to be precise. Someone was here.

Fran.

“Hm.”

It was a good thing she was already up. Fran could be semi-comatose in the mornings; the last thing we wanted was to explain how she was banging away in the forge while clearly half-asleep.

“Who's there?” she asked.

“Good morning, Princess!” cried the elder. Fran opened the door, and the elder bowed to her. He held a tray of food. “Your breakfast.”

“Thanks.”

“Not at all. How are you feeling? You've been busy at the forge all night.”

Crap. Was I too loud?

“Sorry. Did I keep you awake?”

“Banish the thought! We were touched by your dedication, if anything!”

The elder was thankful that Fran pulled an all-nighter for the village, but I had to be more careful. Next time, I’d set up soundproofing spells.

As Fran ate, she and the elder discussed the day’s plans. We would continue smithing while the villagers continued their sword and magic training. The older population would focus on polishing up the equipment.

“You don’t have to practice again today, you know,” said Fran.

“Yes, but everyone is so enthusiastic that they proposed it.”

The chance of using magic was too enticing. Everyone was so motivated that we might see Black Cat mages sooner than I’d thought.

“Feel free to call if you need anything,” said the elder.

“Hm.”

Once he left, we got back to smithing. Today, I’d take the ingots we melted down last night and hammer them into swords while Fran worked on the armor and shields.

It’s nice that, when you level up a skill, you immediately gain all the knowledge you need. This world is so convenient.

I knew exactly how to use the forge, despite never even having seen one back on Earth. The fact that this world’s forges were designed in a completely unique way was no obstacle either. The skill told me everything I needed to know, even how to smith a sword.

Casting was the main method of production in this world. Smiths poured smelted metal into molds and only used the hammer to smooth out the edges. I’d once thought that both Japanese and Western swords were made by casting, but that wasn’t right. Japanese blades were usually forged. At least, that’s what I learned from TV.

However, this world had manatech and magic metals, which meant that a cast sword was as robust as a Japanese forged blade. Thanks to the metal’s inherent mana, forging wasn’t necessary, though hammering could still strengthen a blade, especially when you heated it with mana-imbued flames. As such, forging was generally only used to make high-quality equipment. Casting was good enough for mass production.

Let's give casting a try and see what happens.

Using Double Mind and Telekinesis to cast, hammer, and sharpen simultaneously, I managed to produce numerous swords. The end products were pretty good too. I didn't even break a sweat!

Fifty's a good place to call it.

Including the existing swords in good condition we had set aside, we now had eighty swords in total. That should be enough to equip the greenhorn Black Cats.

Let's see if I can make something else.

I'd always wanted to try a bit of forging, and I had some ingots left over to experiment with. If I happened to make a strong weapon, I was sure the Black Cats would put it to use.

The Blacksmith Skill had instilled knowledge of forging in me. All I had to do was hit and fold, hit and fold, until a sword eventually formed. Strangely, I could tell when the blade was finished. The Crafting Skill indicated that hammering it further would only reduce the quality.

The resulting sword wasn't great, but it wasn't bad either. The poor-quality materials I'd used probably didn't help. Unlike the Iron Swords I'd cast earlier, this was called a Low Quality Steel Sword. It probably represented the limit of what I could achieve with my current skills.

Still, there was room for improvement. I started by adding mana to the forging process. I couldn't infuse a lot of mana, but every bit helped. Next, I ground some monster bones into powder and folded it in. The bones only came from a weak monster, but they still belonged to a monster.

I didn't know whether it would actually work. It was all still theory for now.

You know, this looks all right.

It took longer than before, but I successfully produced another blade. The end product was a Low Quality Manasteel Sword. I had unintentionally made manasteel! Even though the sword was low quality, the mana infusion had worked—increasing the weapon's mana conductivity from F to F+. That should cut through spirit-type enemies.

Name: Iron Sword

Attack: 88; MP: 0; Durability: 300

Mana Conductivity: F-

Skills: None

Name: Low Quality Steel Sword

Attack: 114; MP: 1; Durability: 380

Mana Conductivity: F

Skills: None

Name: Low Quality Manasteel Sword

Attack: 124; MP: 10; Durability: 390

Mana Conductivity: F+

Skills: None

For reference, this was one of Garrus' swords.

Name: High Quality Steel Longsword

Attack: 398; MP: 5; Durability: 600

Mana Conductivity: F

Skills: None

He really was an excellent blacksmith. I decided to forge the remaining ingots into manasteel swords, and only stopped when Fran walked over.

“Teacher.”

Oh, Fran. What's up?

She held her stomach sadly. Did she have a stomachache? “I'm hungry.”

“Woof...”

Oh. Whoops. Is it that time already? It was well past lunch.

Blacksmithing had taken a lot longer than I expected. *Sorry! I'll fix you some lunch right away.*

"Please."

We had three meals every day at the capital, but the Black Cats only ate two: breakfast and dinner. They must've been struggling for food. I decided I should teach them how to better cultivate their farms. I supposed we could always come back once our business with Garrus was settled.

Some curry as an apology, I told Fran.

"Really?"

"Arf?"

You can eat all you want today.

"This is the life," she replied.

Come on, you're exaggerating.

"The name of heaven is Curry."

Fran was so happy, she was getting poetic! Still, the curry was a small price to pay to lighten her mood. Speaking of which—our curry stocks were actually running a bit low. I figured I should plan to make more.

"Delish."

"Woof!"

I decided to use the rest of the afternoon to top up our curry supplies. Fortunately, the smithy had a kitchen, where I could cook hidden from prying eyes.

The kids had grown used to being around Fran, and they started asking for stories from her adventures. The adults wanted to listen in too, and by the time we realized, night had fallen and the entire village was gathered.

Fran started with tales of her journey thus far. She wasn't blessed with rhetorical skills, so she described battling the lich in a laconic manner. Somehow, her prosaic style only drove home the intensity of

the events she recounted. You could hear the faintest gulps from the audience.

“And then the Leviathan saved us,” Fran explained.

“Wooooow!”

“That’s amazing!”

She had the villagers’ full attention. They breathed sighs of relief and wiped the sweat off their chins. It was as if they had been on the journey themselves. Salutia—still front-row center—practically panted with exhaustion.

“What other stories do you have?” she asked.

“We’d love to hear them!” one of the others chimed in.

“Hrm.” Fran looked pensive, having exhausted her repertoire.

She moved on to mythology—specifically, the story of the Black Cats’ ancestors. It wasn’t a cheerful tale, but these people deserved to know why’d they lost the ability to evolve.

“This might sound hard to believe, but the Black Cats used to be a powerful race—”

The villagers perked up their ears, sensing that this story was not going to be a heroic epic. Their faces grew more serious as Fran continued.

For the first time, they learned that one of their own had been Beast King. They learned that the royal family had grown corrupt and used the Evil One’s powers to take over the world. This act of rebellion angered the gods, and the Black Cats were duly punished, stripped of the ability to evolve. The gods cursed them to hunt down Fiends to atone for the sins of their fathers.

“And that’s the end of it.” By the time Fran’s tale came to a finish, the entire town square was silent. It was a lot to take in.

Finally, the elder stepped forward and bowed. “Thank you, Princess, for telling us this important tale.”

“Hm.”

“We shall not let it go to waste.” The elder turned around to his people. “You have heard our princess’s message of our forefathers’ horrible sins!”

The assembled Black Cats looked ashamed. Fiends were the enemy of all this world's rational races. The Black Cats were shocked to hear that their ancestors had sought the Evil One's powers and brought down divine punishment on their people.

"But we are not to despair!" cried the elder. "For the merciful gods showed us the path to atonement!"

His words were powerful enough to lift the spirits of his people, and many turned to look at him.

"Not only can we atone for their sins, but through that, we may learn again how to evolve! We have been as kittens, lost and alone in the darkness, terrified of the violence that befell us, but we need not walk this path any longer! Instead, we can endeavor to become stronger and, in so doing, atone and regain our lost glory! I have decided to dedicate our village to this effort! I cannot force this task upon you, but I hope many of you are with me!"

The elder was a good public speaker. I was hooked. The villagers must have been too, because a thunderclap of applause soon broke the silence. The Black Cats got to their feet and cheered.

"I'll definitely evolve!"

"I'm way past the age to evolve, but I'll help any way I can!"

"I'll carve the princess's words into a stone tablet!"

I was surprised by how the Black Cats immediately accepted Fran's story, but more surprised by the utter lack of any resentment toward their gods. As someone from Earth, it didn't make sense to me. The Black Cats just accepted that they had been at fault, and that the gods were right to punish them.

After that, there was a grand celebration. The festivities even exceeded the ones the night before. I figured it was fitting, considering that this was the night Black Cat history would change forever. Wine and ale were passed around, and the adults tucked Fran and the other children in early.

They're such good people.

"Hm."

I wondered whether there was any way that I could convince her to stay.

“We’re leaving tomorrow.”

Already?

“Hm. I’ve said everything I needed to say.”

There’s no need to rush. We can stay longer if you want.

“No. I’m getting too comfortable. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

I mean—

“Tomorrow.”

Well, it seemed like her mind was made up. I figured we were leaving tomorrow. *Let’s come again sometime.*

“Hm!”

It wasn’t like we’d never come back.

Fran shifted in bed, her eyes glittering with excitement. She couldn’t sleep. Instead, she told me about all the things she did that day. I already knew, of course. I’d been with her the entire time. Still, talking about events could etch them into your memory, and that seemed to be what she wanted—to never forget about Schwarz Katze.

Finally, she fell asleep, the day’s exhaustion having caught up to her. For a long time, the only sounds were her soft snores and Jet’s snuffling breaths. I assumed the Black Cats had ended their festivities.

The clock showed midnight, and Fran and Jet were fast asleep. As I watched over them, though, they woke up suddenly.

“Hrm.”

“Urf.”

They were both awake now. I didn’t sense anything, but their ability to detect danger had always been reliable.

What’s up?

“Hm...?”

“Arf?”

Fran and Jet didn’t know what had woken them. They looked around, still half-asleep. When they didn’t find anything amiss, they tilted their heads.

Well?

“I don’t know.”

“Woof.”

What could it have been? Was there an earthquake? I was used to ignoring smaller earthquakes in Japan, but Fran and Jet might’ve been more sensitive to them.

“Earthquake...?” Fran asked, confused.

“Arf?”

Neither of them could figure out the cause, so we decided to take a look around. Maybe a monster had infiltrated the village using a Stealth Skill. However, after a quiet tour around the village, we came up empty. All we found were stone-drunk Black Cats passed out in the streets. We didn’t know where they lived, so we moved them onto some soft grass.

Was it all a coincidence? I didn’t think so. After all, Fran and Jet had both reacted at exactly the same time.

Let’s keep looking.

“Hm.”

Their restlessness was rubbing off on me, and their raw intuition was far too sharp for me to pass it off as an accident.

Maybe a higher vantage point will help.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Fran got onto Jet’s back, and we raced into the night sky. It was cloudy tonight, and visibility was poor, but Fran surveyed the area anyway.

Anything?

“I don’t know.”

What about you, Jet?

“Ruff...”

Jet’s nose twitched as he sniffed around. He obviously smelled something, but he couldn’t quite work out what. We carried on patrolling the area until finally I saw something. At least, I thought I did.

There...

“What is it, Teacher?”

There, in a crack in the clouds... Something was moving there, I swear.

“That way?”

Yeah, due north.

We headed toward a patch of wilderness several kilometers north. Fran tilted her head and strained her eyes. Even with Nightvision, she couldn't see a thing.

Move closer, Jet.

“Woof!”

Jet continued north for several minutes. The clouds cleared slightly, and the moon shone down on the landscape below.

“Teacher...” Fran croaked. “Are you seeing what I'm seeing?”

I see it.

“Grr...”

Monsters. Lots of them. So many that it looked as if the earth itself undulated. This wasn't an ordinary pack of wolves or goblins. A great horde of monsters marched over the landscape.

We have to be sure. Take us closer!

“Woof!”

“What is that?”

I don't know. Whatever it is, it can't be good!

Three minutes later, Jet hovered over the aforementioned horde. At this distance, we didn't need any light to see them. I felt their massive presence. This was no horde. It was an army.

Someone must've been controlling these creatures. There was no way that this many monsters were moving together without making a noise. And they were all heading south—to Schwarz Katze.

“What do we do?”

I don't know if we can stop them all on our own, Fran.

“But the villagers can’t fight them off, either.”

We’ll warn the village. Get them to evacuate.

“Should we take potshots and kill some of them now?”

No, there’s too many. Some might be troublesome opponents, even for us.

I didn’t even know whether we could outrun them if they gave chase. We could end up leading them straight to the village. We had to hold off on the offensive until the Black Cats evacuated.

“Okay.”

Back to the village, Jet. Double time!

“Woof.”

“Go!”

“Woof woof!”

We rushed to Schwarz Katze, and Fran went straight to the elder’s house. Jet howled for good measure. “Awooooo!”

Nothing beats a howling direwolf to warn of an emergency.

Fran banged on the door. “Elder! Wake up!”

“P-Princess? What is going on?”

The elder opened the door, rubbing his eyes. Jet’s howling had done the trick.

“There’s an emergency,” said Fran.

“A-all right...”

“A horde of monsters is coming to the village.”

“O-oh. Monsters you cannot deal with on your own?”

“Hm. They’re coming through the northern plains. We’ll need the army.”

“B-by the gods...! I shall alert our soldiers immediately!”

“Start evacuating everyone.”

“It shall be done!”

Good thing they trusted Fran implicitly. The Black Cats were leaving their houses now, awakened by Jet’s howling.

“Hear me, good people!” shouted the elder. “The princess spotted

a mass of monsters in the plains to the north. They are approaching us as we speak!”

“What?”

“Oh no...”

Screams of panic rose from the crowd, but the elder shouted them down. “Remain calm! We have time before they arrive! Now rouse your fellow townsfolk, and make ready to depart!”

“A-all right!”

“On it, Elder!”

“We shall inform the guards!” the elder cried.

We accompanied him to the guardhouse while the villagers prepared to evacuate. The Black Cats really were light on their feet, having been an errant tribe before settling down in Schwarz Katze. This wasn’t the first time they’d had to evacuate since their village was founded either. The Black Cats might be useless in battle, but that martial incompetence was matched by their flight skills.

“I know not whether we can weather this storm,” the elder muttered. The neighboring villages’ fortifications were similar to Schwarz Katze’s, so it was no use seeking refuge there. The monsters would crush them in an instant. “We might have to flee all the way to Green Goat.”

But these monsters were faster than the escaping villagers. I didn’t know how much time they had, or whether it would be enough.

“We will need to alert our close neighbors,” the elder said. “Send riders to the surrounding villages and Green Goat.”

“Hm.”

It was a race against time.

“There’s the guardhouse now.”

It looks like they’re already aware.

The guards were outside the guardhouse. They had noticed the commotion in the village, and they stood on alert just in case.

“Good guardsmen!” cried the elder. “There is an emergency!”

“Elder! What on earth is going on?”

“We haven’t much time! You see—”

The elder told the guards exactly what Fran had reported.

“R-really?”

“An army of monsters...”

The guards stared apprehensively at Fran, clearly not buying it. Not being Black Cats, they just didn’t have same kind of faith in her.

The elder noticed their doubts. “We tell you the truth! The princess saw it with her own eyes!”

“Sure, but still...”

“But nothing!” the elder said. “We need you to send riders to Green Goat!”

“Elder, we must confirm the existence of this monster horde first.”

Ugh. We’d have to put this in a way the guards would understand. They gave us no choice.

“So,” said Fran. “You don’t believe me?”

“We do, but...”

“Send the riders. I’ll take the blame if anything goes wrong. But if you’re going to slow us down...”

Fran sent out a wave of Intimidation to establish who was in charge here. She wasn’t about to cut the guards down where they stood, of course, but beastmen respected strength. Fran was just taking full advantage of that respect.

The guards nodded immediately, recognizing her authority. “Understood!”

“We shall send the riders at once!”

“I’ll go to Green Goat myself,” said Fran.

“A-are you sure?”

“Hm. Faster that way. You guys take care of the surrounding villages.”

“It shall be done!” the elder said with great confidence.

“I’m off. Jet.”

“Woof!”

Jet took to the skies, and we zoomed off.

“Hrrr...”

Every second counted. Jet strained himself until he was in clear discomfort.

“Urf...hurf...”

He belched some sort of white slime—probably the contents of his stomach. We rode through the night sky, Jet holding down his dinner as best he could.

“You can do it, boy.”

We’re counting on you, Jet!

“Awooo!”

All Fran and I could do was be there for him.

Thanks to Jet’s heroic efforts, we made the four-hour trip back to Green Goat in a little under an hour. The gate guards were shocked to see a giant direwolf rip through the darkness, but we didn’t have time to shrink him down to a friendlier size. *Sorry about that!*

“Thanks, Jet.”

“Ruff...”

You still have the return trip to worry about. Get some rest.

“Woof.”

Jet retreated to the shadows without a single complaint about the ordeals ahead. Complaining took energy, and he needed every ounce of his.

Time for us to do our part.

“Hm!”

Fran called out to the guards. As much as we wanted to rush right to the marquis’s estate, disrespecting due process would probably slow us down.

“I am the Black Lightning Princess. I wish to notify the marquis of an emergency situation. Let me see him. Now.”

“O-okay!”

A giant direwolf had descended from the darkness, and the little girl riding it turned out to be the acclaimed Black Lightning Princess. She burned with Intimidation, for whatever reason, and demanded to

see the marquis of the whole city. The guard nodded and opened the gate, far too shaken to ask questions.

Once inside, Fran took to the rooftops and Air Hopped her way to the marquis's mansion. She reached it in less than five minutes.

"Wh-whoa! A little girl?"

"Where did she...? What are you doing here?!"

The guards pointed their spears at her.

Fran did not have time to humor them. "Is this the marquis's mansion?"

"O-oh. Black Lightning Princess, is that you?"

"Hm. Is this marquis's mansion?"

"Y-yes, it is!"

"Let me see him. It's an emergency."

"Pl-please wait while I tell him that you're here!"

"I'm in a hurry. If you're not back in ten minutes, I'm going in by myself."

"Ma'am?"

"Go."

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

The guard went pale and rushed inside, calling for his friends.

"A-and what is this emergency, if I may ask?" the remaining guard asked meekly.

"That's for the marquis to know."

"V-very well..."

Oh yeah, ask him about the town's military strength.

"You got any knights in town?" Fran inquired.

"Yes. The city's remaining knights all serve under the marquis."

Finally, some good news. Beast knights were probably stronger than your average knight. We were about to ask how many there were when the previous guard returned. *That was fast!* It had only been five minutes.

"Th-the marquis will see you now! Right this way!"

“Hm.”

The guard led us to a small room near the entrance. It was no throne room, but it was still sumptuously decorated. Almarno, the muscular marquis, waited for us in his pajamas. The situation looked like a setup for a skit. I’d have laughed, if I didn’t have a monster army to worry about.

“It’s been four days, Black Lightning Princess!” said Almarno.

“Hm. Thank you for seeing me.”

“Not at all. I apologize for my rough apparel. I heard it was an emergency.”

This was the kind of noble I liked—one who rated the convenience of his guests above his own appearance.

“That’s okay,” said Fran. “You look great in it.”

“Thank you. Now, what is the emergency you speak of? Have you uncovered another assassination plot?”

“No.”

“What is it, then?”

“There’s an army of monsters coming in from the north.”

“What?! From the north, you say?” The news struck Almarno like a splash of cold water.

“Hm. They’re heading south toward Schwarz Katze.”

“How many?”

“Uh...a lot? They covered the whole plain.”

“By the gods... I don’t suppose this is your idea of a joke?”

“You can have my head if I’m lying.”

Fran! What are you saying?!

It’s fine. I’m telling the truth.

Sure, but that’s not the point! Don’t bet your life so easily next time!

What? All right.

As I panicked, Almarno muttered to himself. He stroked his white beard as he processed the information. “A stampede? There are no dungeons nearby, so that can’t be it...”

As ruler of these lands, he knew the location of any and all dungeons near his city. Only an old, well-established dungeon could have produced so many monsters.

“What’s to the north?” Fran asked.

“Nothing noteworthy. The kingdom of Heredia lies to the northeast, and Basharl is to the northwest. Between them and us is an uncharted mountain range we call the Border Mountains.”

The Border Mountains were steep and rugged—harsh terrain where only the hardest monsters could survive. The Beastman Nation had once sent a special task force to cross the range, and failed utterly. There was no way the weaker monsters we’d seen in the army could have scaled those mountains, but that also meant that whole area was poorly fortified.

So, where did the monsters come from? I just couldn’t figure it out. Regardless, we needed to stop them.

“Send the military,” said Fran.

As soon as she spoke, Almarno’s face fell. “...”

“What’s wrong?”

“I cannot,” he said grimly. “Not right away.”

“Why not?”

“Fighting with Basharl broke out along the southwest border three days ago.” That was news to us, and very bad news for Almarno. “I deployed over half of Green Goat’s military there. The only ones left are the reserves.”

“But you’re not defenseless.”

“We can just about defend ourselves, but against a whole army of monsters...?” Almarno bowed his head. “I apologize, Black Lightning Princess! Green Goat will take in as many refugees as possible. It is the only city well-fortified enough to withstand the force of which you speak. But I cannot send out any more soldiers. It would leave us defenseless!”

“Is there anyone in town who can use Earth Magic?” Fran asked. “If they could create a big wall, they might buy us some time.”

“Only one Land Mage in the country is capable of that, and he is currently in the thick of the battle against Basharl.”

“I see.”

“I shall contact the armies to the south immediately to ask for help!”

“How long will it take them to arrive?”

“A few days at the very least. Until then, every soldier we have shall need to remain here.”

“Okay.” Fran nodded in understanding and made ready to leave.

“I truly apologize. Wh-where are you going?”

“The Adventurer’s Guild. I’m done here.”

“W-will you not stay?”

Fran was as powerful as an A-Rank. Not only could she defend the city against the looming threat, but her presence would reassure the marquis’s citizens and boost the morale of his troops. Fran wasn’t about to go along with that, however.

“Can’t,” she said. “I don’t abandon my kinsmen.”

She didn’t blame Almarno for any of this, but he looked visibly distressed. He stood up, gnashing his teeth in despair. “I’m sorry...truly! Please...save the northern villages!”

He bowed his broad shoulders, begging Fran to do what he could not.

“It’s all right,” Fran said, clapping a hand on his trembling shoulder.

“I beg of you...!”

“Hm.” The marquis watched as Fran left.

She made her way to the Adventurer’s Guild, located right in the heart of the city. Once again, her title opened all the doors we needed. The receptionist left immediately and came back a few minutes later to take Fran downstairs to the Guildmaster, who was both powerful and evolved—an aging old man with a pure white beard. He was surprised to see us again so soon, and immediately sensed that something was wrong.

“What’s the emergency, Black Lightning Princess?”

“An army of monsters coming in from the north.”

“Excuse me? Can you elaborate?”

Fran explained the situation to the Guildmaster, whose shock soon gave way to consideration.

“An army of monsters in the thousands, you say?”

“We need the adventurers’ help.”

“Of course. I shall send out a call for everyone we have. I only hope there are enough of us left,” he muttered, looking worried.

“What do you mean?”

“Most of our adventurers went south to assist in the war effort.”

“I thought adventurers weren’t conscripted?” Fran said.

I remembered the guild’s fine print from the day Fran had signed up. Most adventurers didn’t want to get tangled in international politics, and the guild was set up so that the government couldn’t force them to. Adventurers’ sole obligation was exterminating monsters and bandits.

Long ago, Raydoss had broken the agreement and conscripted adventurers to fight their wars. Anyone who refused was summarily executed. As a result, adventurers left the kingdom in droves, sentencing Raydoss to defeat. The kingdom retaliated by eliminating all the country’s Adventurer’s Guilds.

It was really best not to break a contract with adventurers, but that wasn’t to say that they couldn’t take contracts with the government if they wanted to.

“They left of their own accord,” said the Guildmaster. “This is our country, after all. You don’t have to be part of the army to want to protect your own nation.”

The Adventurer’s Guild held special favor with the crown, and the current king was an adventurer himself. I supposed it was only natural that beastman adventurers would head for the front lines.

“Even if we gather every adventurer in the neighboring villages,” said the Guildmaster, “we can’t fend off an army.”

“We need all the help we can get,” said Fran.

“I understand. But we might only have enough people to bolster Green Goat’s defenses. Please try to understand.”

“Hm. That’s fair.” Fran got to her feet.

“Will you go back?” the Guildmaster asked.

I figured he wanted her to stay too, but he didn't try to argue with her. After all, Fran was a Black Cat. The Guildmaster understood her desire to protect her own people.

"Hm," she said. "Bye-bye."

"Godspeed."

As Jet raced back toward Schwarz Katze, Fran and I discussed our plans.

We can't expect help from the military or the adventurers.

"Hm."

If we did nothing, however, the monsters would catch up with the Black Cats in no time. No matter how quickly the villagers tried to evacuate, the monsters were faster. The younger Black Cats might get away if they used every horse in the village, but there was no way Fran would settle for that.

The village was everything she'd ever dreamed of—a place where Black Cats could live in peace and harmony. Fran had been at peace in Schwarz Katze from the second we arrived. She was determined to protect the village.

It's gonna be tough...real tough.

"What's the matter, Teacher?"

Fran, we're the only ones who can protect the Black Cats. Help isn't coming.

"Hm."

You know how dangerous that's going to be?

"Of course." Fran nodded. She had a grim look on her face.

I need you to be safe. If you'd like, I can teleport us a million miles away.

"Sorry, Teacher. You know I can't do that." Her eyes looked like they could pierce through anything.

Urk...we're really doing this, then.

“Hm!”

I knew from the start that Fran wouldn’t leave her fellow Black Cats in the dust. Still, I had to say my piece. Fran would fight to the death for her kinsmen, and I was terrified of losing her.

Sorry. I was being stupid. I just feel so useless right now. What was I thinking? Here she was, heading into battle, and I was dampening her resolve.

“You’re not useless. You’re the greatest sword ever!”

Fran... She was right. I was her sword, and she had decided that she would fight. All I had to do was help her win. *I’m fine now.*

“Thanks, Teacher. I know you’re worried about me. But I need your help to save my friends!”

And my help’s exactly what you’re gonna get!

“Hm!”

Still...killing all those monsters is going to be really hard.

“I know.”

We wouldn’t just face a few goblins this time. That army could be full of A- and B-Threat creatures, for all we knew. We had to expect the worst.

Our priority was to stop their advance. That would buy the villagers more time to escape. Of course, that meant directly engaging the horde, and I wasn’t sure how long we could hold them off. Eliminating whoever controlled the monsters would be the best option—not that I had a clue where that person might be. Still, the horde *definitely* had a master. There was no way this many monsters came together by accident. Whether it was a Goblin King, an elite monster, or something else entirely, a leader was out there somewhere, and all this would go much better if we found them.

If we couldn’t find a way to hold the monsters back, they’d catch up with the villagers. Could we protect the Black Cats and attack the horde at the same time? We might be experts in killing, but we knew very little about protecting others.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Fran. “We still have to do this.”

You’re right!

I would do my best to help her wishes come true.

All the while, Jet streaked on through the sky. He wasn't going at maximum speed—he had a battle to conserve energy for—but we still moved fast, and soon caught up with the evacuating Black Cats. When they noticed us, they cleared space for us to land.

“Everyone's here,” Fran said.

Good. Evacuation is going just as planned.

The villagers were heading south, down the mountain toward Green Goat.

“Take us down,” Fran told Jet.

“Woof!”

Jet descended, and the Black Cats welcomed him with hopeful smiles.

“Princess, you're back!”

“Hm. Is everyone accounted for?”

“Of course,” said the elder.

He looked relieved to see her. Not just because he worried about what would happen to them without her, but because he was worried for her too.

I'd prepared myself to find the Black Cats still dillydallying around in the village, but they had moved fast. The elder explained that they finished preparing an hour ago and left the village immediately, bringing only a few valuables and several days' worth of food. They left anything that would slow them down behind, and as they moved, the adults surrounded the children to form a shield. They really were good at this.

That said, they could only move at the pace of their oldest and slowest members. At this rate, it would take them days to reach Green Goat.

“I can't come with you,” Fran said. “Will you be all right?”

“Yes. We can defend ourselves with the equipment you provided.”

“It's good enough to beat the local monsters with!” Salutia chimed in.

She and the men of the town were armed and ready. They might've been weak individually, but they were motivated. That should

be enough to deter any small monsters that got in their way.

“Do not worry, Princess,” said Salutia.

“Hm. Take care of the village.”

The little girl beat her chest. “I will!”

“I’ll be off.”

“Do be careful,” said the elder.

None of them asked where Fran was going. They all knew—she was going to battle the monsters so that they could escape, and she would fight to the death for it. The best they could do was send her off with smiles.

“We’ll see you soon.”

“We shall be waiting.”

“Hm. Bye-bye.”

The Black Cats bowed their heads, and Fran departed into the dark sky, heading north. There was no going back now.

“And we’re back,” Fran murmured.

Yep.

Schwarz Katze was below us, dark and empty. There was no sign of the great feast held there just hours ago. All the laughter was gone now, and only the wind whispered through the village’s streets.

“We’ll protect everyone,” said Fran. Seeing the deserted village only renewed her resolve.

Yeah, we will.

“We’ll give them something to smile about again.”

“Woof!”

We can’t just go rushing in. Let’s figure out a plan.

“Sure.”

I wanted to intercept the monsters while they were still on the plains. Once they got into the forest, they could slip past our defenses more easily. Besides, it was easier to read the horde’s movements out on the plains. It would mean that we had nowhere to hide, but at least it lowered the chances of stealthier monsters ambushing us.

I can feel them coming.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before the monsters reached the forest edge.

"We have to hurry."

"Woof!"

Oh well. We'll think of a strategy on the way there.

Our main concern was stopping the horde from progressing any farther. We needed to figure out exactly how to do that.

"Should we make a wall? Maybe a pitfall?" Fran suggested.

Hmm.

Both those things would be nice, but our Earth Magic just wasn't strong enough. Even fully charged, we could only dig a hole three meters wide and five meters deep. That might split the horde and make the situation worse, if anything. Of course, we could dig a trench by casting the spell over and over again, but that would take too much time and mana.

What would people have done back on Earth? I didn't know much about military tactics, but the term "guerrilla warfare" came to mind. It was a tactic small militias used to fight far more numerous foes—setting up traps that forced the enemy to stay on their toes, until anxiety and fear of invisible foes undermined the morale and combat capability of the guerrillas' enemies. At least, that was what I got from light novels and movies.

The problem with guerrilla warfare was that we didn't have enough points in our Trap Skills. Even making pitfalls with Earth Magic would only mean digging holes and covering them. Those would probably be hazardous to the Black Cats once the fighting died down, like the landmines in Vietnam.

I think we'll just have to draw attention to ourselves and meet the monsters head-on.

"All right."

In the end, we couldn't really come up with anything better. Still, we could at least add a bit of flair.

"Stone Wall. Stone Wall."

Stone Wall! Stone Wall! Stone Wall!

"Will that do?"

Yep, looking good. It even has windows.

“Hm.”

My turn, then. Earth Control!

We quickly threw together a building at the forest edge, raising multiple Stone Walls and fusing them together with Earth Control. We made a gate, which looked a bit like the Arc de Triomphe, and gave the whole place the air of a well-defended garrison. In fact, it was a well-defended nothing at all. The thing was hollow inside.

However, all that mattered was that it looked the part. The oncoming horde wouldn't ignore our fake defenses in favor of rushing into the forest. At worst, they'd try to destroy the building in a pincer attack, and at best they'd stop traveling entirely. I didn't know how long the structure would stall them, but it certainly couldn't hurt.

All our little fort needed was a few soldiers. And where would we get soldiers, you ask? Simple. We would make them.

Over to you, Jet.

“Woof!”

I drew the corpses of goblins and robbers from my Pocket Dimension and laid them on the ground. There were about ten, all in good condition. Jet used necromancy to turn them into zombies, and we posted them on the gates.

They certainly looked the part. Sure, they were weaker than goblins, but all they had to do was make it seem as though the fort was manned. I equipped as many zombies as I could with bows and arrows to fire at the incoming horde, and armed the rest with spears and swords—just the right equipment for gate guards.

And there's our fake fort.

“Should we go now?” Fran asked.

Not before a round of buffs.

“All right.”

There was no way we were going to fight a monster horde without a full set of magical buffs.

How do you feel? I asked.

“Good. Stronger.”

Great!

“Hm!”

Our preparations complete, we set off again toward the approaching army.

Go higher, boy. I don't want them to see us. We need the initiative.

“Woof!”

Jet accelerated higher into the sky. After some time, the monster horde came into view below. The clouds had cleared now, and we could get a better look at them.

It seems like the ground is squirming down there.

“Like a trash heap.”

We'll start with a bang and knock the wind out of their sails.

“Hm!”

We approached the horde carefully, making sure they didn't notice us.

All set. You ready, Fran?

“As ever.”

“Woof!”

I figured we were good to go.

“Awaken!”

No Flashing Thunderclap this time. Fran had to pace herself. This was going to be a long night.

Here we go!

“Hm!”

“Grrr!”

Chapter 5: The Army of Monsters

AS SOON AS Fran Awakened, I launched a volley of spells.

How's this for a warning shot? Kanna Kamuy!

“Ekato Keraunos!”

“Groaaaar!”

Kanna Kamuy crashed into the monsters' front lines, and Fran's hundred bolts struck everything around them. Meanwhile, Jet cast a venomous mist with his Deadly Poison Magic. The monsters shrieked and recoiled, and Kanna Kamuy's explosion ripped through over a hundred of them. The survivors lay squirming, suffocating in Jet's poison mist.

“Gyaooooo!” Monsters screamed in pain, and pandemonium descended on the plains.

Our initial attack had been a success! The horde panicked, looking anxiously at the sky, completely unaware that the thunderstorm was man-made. Best of all, they slowed down.

Let's keep going!

“Hm!”

Jet circled around the monsters, and we rained down death from above. Fran pelted small monsters with flaming arrows, while I threw down whatever I could find lying in my Pocket Dimension. There were rocks and logs, water and sand, poisonous and combustible objects. Everything was free game, as long as it dealt damage.

Take that!

“Wow.”

A thirty-meter-wide boulder caused particular terror in the horde. It had once been a fragment of the floating-island dungeon. I thought I'd gotten rid of all those during our encounter with the Midgardsormr, but apparently, I had one left over.

The large boulder was more effective than I thought it would be.

The horde wasn't expecting a rock to rain down from the sky, and they stopped in their tracks, lamenting their plight. The front line scattered, and the whole army's formation started to break down. Everything was going according to plan.

Let's get up close and personal!

"Hm!"

"Grr!"

The horde still didn't notice us as we dove down and landed in front of them. The front lines consisted mostly of weaker monsters: goblins and orcs, wolves and fanged rats, and a few lizards and undead.

Unlike the goblins we'd cleared out the other day, these ones wore rags and fought with clubs. Maybe the front line was meant to be a meat shield. If so, it wasn't a good sign. It meant that whoever controlled them was smart enough to consider their strategy.

Haaaaa!

"Haaaaa!"

Fran and I let out cries and rushed into battle.

"G-gyagya?"

"Giii!"

The monsters stirred as they sensed our sudden, immense power. They didn't go into full retreat, but we definitely caught them off guard.

"I'm going in, Teacher!"

Give it everything you've got! We don't have to worry about friendly fire tonight!

"Hm!" Fran leapt into a pack of terrified monsters, slicing through the vanguard of goblins and wolves.

"Tsch! Haa!"

Fran was as efficient as she was coolheaded. She aimed right for the small monsters' crystals, and crushed the heads of any stronger ones. We'd fought these sorts of monsters before, so we weren't too worried about collecting materials. We let their dead bodies lie where they fell. They'd make decent obstacles for the ones behind them, if anything.

Take this! Burst Flame! Gale Hazard! Thunder Web! I unleashed an

onslaught of crowd-control spells, intent on clearing wide swathes as quickly as possible. Although the spells were weak, I could charge them to increase their destructive capabilities. The resulting tsunami of spells killed the goblins in one shot, left the orcs one hit away from death, and even took the ogres down to half health.

Lots of small monsters were a bigger threat to the villagers than a single stronger enemy. A hundred goblins could cover way more ground than a single orc. We kept that in mind as we wreaked havoc on the battlefield, but the monsters kept coming. The creatures now piling on us were more aggressive, and had magic resistance to boot. As the goblins fled, these new monsters rushed Fran and Jet, who made quick work of them.

“Yaaah!”

“Awoooo!”

Fran welcomed the monsters with a series of slashes, and Jet ambushed them from behind—positioning himself in Fran’s blind spot and getting the drop on anything that tried to attack her. His poison mist was a lot stronger than I expected, too. It was powerful enough to kill goblins and other small monsters, leaving them choking and squirming on the ground. It wasn’t enough to kill stronger creatures like ogres, but it definitely slowed them down. That was perfect—and terrifying. Fran would have taken damage from the mist too, but I protected her with a wind barrier, and Jet was smart enough to use the poison mist as far away from us as possible. It was a welcome addition. After all, we needed all the firepower that we could get right now.

“Haaaa!”

Thunder Web!

“Groooar!”

Monsters attacked from all directions as the whole front line dogpiled onto Fran. It was great news for us, but I was beginning to feel worn out from casting so many spells. Fran restored my mana every time she attacked, but I was spending more than I regained. It was time to change my approach.

I need to recover. I’ll ease off the spells for now.

“Hm.”

I’d need that mana back when the elites showed up. For now, I

turned my attention to supporting Fran.

“Ha!”

“Gigyaaa!”

“Gyooo!”

“Huff!”

“Grooo!”

Without a curtain of spells to hold them back, the monsters’ attacks became more intense. They attacked from all sides, hailing down spells and even rocks, but they failed to even scratch Fran.

You doing okay, Fran?

“Hm. I’m fine.”

I replenished her stamina so she could keep going, but I was worried, and I couldn’t do anything for her mental exhaustion. Still, Fran’s response reassured me. I remembered how exhausted she’d been in the floating dungeon, and this was a far cry from that. She really had grown.

Fran was panting, but still holding her own. She was careful to remain calm and not rely on adrenaline.

Pace yourself. We’ve got a long night ahead of us.

“Hm!”

Fran fought on, determined not to let a single enemy slip past. She dodged a club as it swung by, crushing the goblin’s skull with her left elbow. At the same time, she tripped an advancing orc with wind magic, then thrust me upward and stabbed a wolf charging in from the side. She pulled me out quickly and threw me at a giant lizard, then backflipped away—bringing her heel down on an ogre’s head. She looked like she was dancing as bodies piled up around her.

“Grrr!”

“Gaooorgh!”

“Big one incoming,” Fran reported.

I guess it’s time to get serious.

“About time.”

Let’s go!

A group of giant monsters emerged from the horde: four-meter-tall lizards, giant lions with green fur, and high ogres wielding iron clubs. There were about fifty in all. I guessed that they knew there was no way the smaller monsters could stop Fran. Most were E- and D-Threats, and pretty strong as monsters went. Even just one of them could've destroyed an entire village. We'd have no problem killing them one at a time, but we couldn't let our guard down. There was strength in their numbers. Meanwhile, small monsters continued harassing us from afar.

Jet, thin them down, but stay in the shadows.

“Woof!”

Don't get surrounded now, boy.

If that happened, the monsters could overwhelm even Jet.

Kill everything immediately around us, Fran! I'll handle the ranged attacks!

“Hm!”

Fran charged at the wall of giant monsters without hesitation. She danced into the pack, ducking under claws bigger than she was and avoiding horns thicker than utility poles.

“Haaa!”

“Grooo!”

“Too slow!”

“Graaarg!”

“There!”

“Giii!”

It was impossible to kill these things in just one hit, but they went down quickly enough with a few slashes. I must have grown stronger too; when I first woke in this world, fighting like this would have snapped me clean in half.

The monsters were getting perplexed. The creature in front of them was supposed to be weak. She was supposed to be prey. Yet she had more mana and power than they did.

I noticed the fear in their eyes. Could they have been afraid if they were truly under someone else's control? Perhaps their master was simply more powerful than them. How else would you direct an army of

monsters without taking over their minds? Still, the prospect of a creature so powerful that it terrified an entire army into serving it was quite worrying. It would be A-Threat at the very least.

As I thought about all this, I kept fighting, using Double Mind to keep myself from messing up. The monsters were getting desperate now. They stopped firing rocks, arrows, and spells, and resorted to flinging their dead compatriots' bodies at us. Through it all, however, Fran didn't let up. She cut down the enemies close to her and fired spells at the distant ones—thinning the horde out one monster at a time.

By now, the fight was starting to take its toll. Fran had spent half her mana and breathed raggedly. Monster blood covered her entire body—some of it red, some of it a thick and grungy black. Patches of blood caked her face and arms.

I had to cleanse her before it interfered with her vision. *Can you keep going, Fran?*

“Of course!” Fran shouted to pep herself up.

She glared at the monsters, her eyes still lit up with battle fury. The sheer force of her gaze momentarily stopped the horde, as Fran finally forced them to acknowledge that she was no ordinary little girl. If this army did have a master, they had to regret wasting so much cannon fodder on her.

They must be watching us somehow. Were they in the horde, or did they have a subordinate on the ground somewhere, relaying information back? Now that I thought about it, I wasn't even sure whether monsters could process orders.

All around us, the horde parted like the sea.

Teacher?

Yeah, I noticed.

Five monsters stepped out, emitting powerful waves of mana. You could tell they were strong just by looking at them, but Identify confirmed my suspicions. The monsters were C-Threats, probably the strongest units in the entire army. A single one could level the entirety of Green Goat, and here were five all at once. If we didn't stop these things, they could endanger the entire Beastman Nation.

War with Basharl outside the Beastman Nation's borders, and a

monster army within them... The Beast King really had picked the perfect time to go abroad! Hang on. Was that why this happened now? Was Basharl behind this?

No, now wasn't the time for conspiracy theories. We had monsters to fight. To make matters worse, each monster was different.

The biggest was a Graphite Hydra: a giant, many-headed serpent. As the Graphite Hydra's name implied, its black scales reflected an eerie shine. The creature was over twenty meters long, and was equipped with Fast Regeneration, as well as the ability to breathe dark, poison, and flame elements. Each of its six heads was large enough to swallow Fran whole.

Next was a Crimson Wolf, a powerful creature that controlled flames. It was probably the fire evolution of Jet's Darkness Wolf line, and it possessed high-level melee and magical attacks, as well as stamina and agility, making it the most evenly balanced of the five.

The Steel Titanbear was next: a ten-meter-tall bear covered in hard metal fur. It boasted the highest defense of the five, though it had no special abilities. It also had a Strength stat that sickened me, making it even stronger than the Graphite Hydra.

Next was a giant bug called the Adamas Beetle, which looked like an eight-meter-long Hercules beetle. As its name implied, its shell was tough, and it also possessed high Magic Resistance. If that wasn't bad enough, the overgrown bug also had Fast Flight. That didn't bode well.

Finally, hovering over them all was a Demon with jet-black skin. This one was only a baron—a rank below the demon earl we'd fought in a dungeon once—but he was armed to the teeth with skills. He might even have been stronger than the demon earl, given that that guy had an idiot for a dungeon master.

We faced five city-leveling creatures, and the other monsters were on the move again—continuing their march.

This is bad. The only silver lining I gleaned from all this was the chance that these monsters had come out of a dungeon. Demons were unique to dungeons, and couldn't usually spawn unless summoned.

What do we do? Fran asked.

We can't fight these five and stop the horde from advancing.

It was too dangerous to fight two battles at once. We needed to

focus on the elites.

We'll beat them fast, then, said Fran.

It's the only way. Just stay calm!

"Hm!"

"What is bothering you, Salutia?"

"Elder...will the princess be all right?"

"Salutia!"

"Ow! What was that for?!"

"Will the princess be all right?' Of *course* she will!"

"B-but..."

"Do I have to remind you how strong she is? Or how she's evolved?"

"But we don't know if she's strong enough to beat the horde. What if..."

"You fool!"

"Ow! Will you stop hitting me with your stick?!"

"Listen, child! The princess is fighting for our sake!"

"Uh-huh..."

"She will be all right, but we must have faith in her! And we must wait!"

"R-really...?"

"Indeed! Do not blaspheme the princess by worrying about her!"

"Y-yeah. You're right. Our princess isn't about to be killed by some monsters."

"Ha ha ha! That's the spirit! Now wipe the gloom off your face and smile! That is the greatest sign of faith that you can offer our champion, the Black Lightning Princess!"

"Ha ha..."

“Wa ha ha ha!”

“Ha ha ha ha!”

“There you go. That’s more like it! Come, good people! Let us practice our laughter together! Wa ha ha ha!”

Forgive me, Princess... I pray for your safe return.

We stared down the five elites, and Fran watched silently for an opening. The longer this took, the more likely it was that the rest of the horde would disperse. After that, they would be really difficult to eliminate. They were probably heading for the refugees even now. Still, we couldn’t win this fight if we rushed.

Jet, can you handle the Crimson Wolf on your own?

“Woof!”

Jet possessed the title of Great Wolf Clan, which gave him the ability to intimidate other wolf types. That would definitely come in handy.

We can’t have that demon buffing his teammates. You’ll have to fight him, Fran. Don’t hold back. Just pop Flashing Thunderclap if things get hairy, okay?

Hm! Fran drew the Enchanted Phantom Augite Blade from her Pocket Dimension.

I had to focus on the other three. The monsters hadn’t yet noticed that I was anything more than a normal magic sword—they’d never expect me to start flying around by myself.

The monsters surrounded Fran, cautious of her new weapon. That bought us some time. I focused my mana.

Here we go!

“Hm!”

Raaaaah! Kanna Kamuy!

The monsters noticed the spike in magical energy and rushed forward, but it was too late.

You're up first, snakehead!

The skies opened, releasing a pillar of lightning that engulfed the gigantic Graphite Hydra. By the time the dust settled, the multi-headed serpent was no more. The lightning didn't leave a single scale or bone intact. All that remained was a huge crater.

Let's see you try to regenerate when you're dead!

Kanna Kamuy created powerful shock waves that knocked the remaining large monsters back. The creatures looked dumbstruck, staring at the space where the hydra had been. I understood their shock, but didn't they know every second counted on the battlefield? I was beginning to think that these monsters were new at their jobs. Not that I was complaining.

And another one!

I hurtled myself with Telekinetic Catapult at the Steel Titanbear, the second most dangerous giant. Transforming into a spear, I pierced all the way to its crystal.

"Gaoooooooo!"

The bear was instantly vaporized, still awestruck by its comrade's death. It would normally have dodged the lethal blow, but it had no way of foreseeing the fact I could move on my own. The demon was the only one that noticed, and it was too occupied with Fran to be of any real help to the rest.

Still, things didn't go quite as smoothly as planned. The Titanbear's defenses were too strong for me to pass right through it. In fact, I barely made it as far as the crystal. If the bear's hide had been any thicker, I wouldn't have been able to kill it. Also, now that the other monsters knew I could move, the same trick wouldn't work on them. I vanished the Titanbear's carcass into storage, trying to scare them, but they only roared louder.

Time to return to Fran's side. At least I'd managed to take down two of them. It was now three versus three.

We just need to beat these guys.

"You got it."

"Woof!" Jet barked, attacking the Crimson Wolf. "Grrrr!"

"Groaaar!"

Jet was smaller and faster than his fiery cousin, and he drew the direwolf away from us while dodging its bites. As a fellow wolf, Jet knew exactly how to get its attention.

That leaves us with the bug and the demon.

“Hm!” Fran brandished me and faced the two monsters. The demon was our first priority because of his ability to use magic. “They’re holding back.”

They’re watching us.

The demon threw down several suppression spells, and his superior sensory capabilities made it difficult to return the favor. If we had Jet’s help, we could’ve taken this guy down in one hit.

“Raaaargh!”

“Groaaar!”

But our direwolf was in a stalemate. Jet had more mana, but the Crimson Wolf had stamina, and their stats were evenly matched. Jet kept to the shadows, chipping away at the Crimson Wolf with his superior Agility and Shadow Magic, while the Crimson Wolf looked for a one-hit comeback. Jet seemed like he had the advantage for now, but he was still in the thick of it. One solid strike from the Crimson Wolf would turn the tide. For now, we were on our own.

“Giiii!”

The Adamas Beetle lowered its horns and charged toward Fran.

“Kishaaa!”

The demon was right behind it, watching us and acting as the beetle’s eyes. It was the perfect setup for them—the demon pelted us with spells as the beetle charged blindly into battle. Both were fast and could fly, and if we went after one, the other would harass us. They truly made for a dangerous combination.

The Adamas Beetle was a lot stronger than we thought, despite being a lower Threat level than the demon. It made sharp turns with mana propulsion, hovering and then charging at the opportune moment. It was hard enough to avoid. With its added magic and skills, we could only dodge by giving it our full attention. The Adamas Beetle was an awful menace, with mobility to match its speed.

“Shaaa!”

This thing!

The bug wasn't our only problem. While we were occupied with the Adamas Beetle, the demon produced a poison sword and slashed at us. He was slow enough for Fran to dodge. Or at least, I thought he was.

"Giiiiiii!"

"Agh!"

While she evaded the demon's attack, the Adamas Beetle charged into her. Fran tried to wrench away when she sensed the insect's presence, but it was too late. Even worse, changing trajectory wasn't the only thing the Adamas Beetle could do with its mana—it could also strengthen its horn until it broke Fran's barrier.

Fran!

Fran was tossed into the air, her right arm and leg bent out of shape, while blood gushed from her head. That wasn't the worst of her injuries—the Adamas Beetle had gouged her, leaving a gaping hole on the right side of her body. Bodily fluids sprayed out in a mist, and her pink guts spilled out. I frantically cast Greater Heal, supporting her body with Telekinesis, but her wounds were too grave.

Instant Regeneration, Fran!

"Urk..."

Fran, can you hear me? You need to use Instant Regeneration—now!

She nodded through the pain. She barely made it, but when she did, her wounds began to heal immediately. That took a lot of her mana, though. The skill didn't synergize well with her. Humans were complex creatures, and the mana cost of regenerating their bodies was steep.

"Hurk...urgh..." Fran huffed and puffed, setting up another barrier.

You all right?

"Hm..." She grunted. *What happened?*

That bug. It came out of nowhere.

It hadn't seemed as though the beetle came out of one of Fran's blind spots. I checked again, but it definitely didn't have any teleportation attacks. It had Stealth, but not enough to slip by unnoticed.

It's a tricky little bug. No wonder it's an elite monster.

"We'll beat it yet," said Fran.

Yeah. Her determination hadn't faltered. That unwavering will was her greatest weapon.

We watched the Adamas Beetle to work out the mystery of its strange attack. At least, we tried to.

"Arooo!"

"Go away."

The demon attacked at the worst possible time. It wasn't powerful enough to kill us, but it exploited our lapse in attention, forcing us to go on the defensive.

"Giiii!"

"Urk."

Once again, the Adamas Beetle charged at Fran, but this time, I was ready with my barriers and Telekinesis. Even so, the resulting shockwave was strong enough to blow Fran away.

I'll heal you. Just focus on getting away!

"Hm!"

I restored Fran's broken left arm. Where had the beetle's attack even come from?! It was completely silent with zero projection. The only reason I'd seen it at all was because I knew it was coming.

Fran, I'm turning off Haste for now.

Sure.

We had buffed ourselves with Timespace Magic to reap the benefits of greater agility, but Haste had its downside. It dulled your other senses, even Sense Skills, and it was difficult to discern noises through the time lag. In situations where you needed to make full use of your Sense Skills, Haste could be a hindrance.

Sorry about this. You'll have to fight the old-fashioned way.

"Hm. No problem. Flashing Thunderclap!"

I had wanted to save Flashing Thunderclap, as it didn't last long, but fighting two agile monsters in normal time would've been difficult without it.

“Kieeeeeeeee!”

The demon attacked, and Fran once again blocked his blade with me. Yet, for some reason, the demon’s poison sword cut through her barrier.

“Guh...?”

This demon’s strong, too! He seemed to have amplified his poison blade with mana.

The Adamas Beetle charged Fran for the third time, but by now, she had already seen its trick twice. When she sensed the beetle’s horn coming straight for her heart, she twisted away—sacrificing her right shoulder and gritting her teeth as the beetle tore her arm out of its socket.

“Aaaargh!”

Still, Fran found some way to drive her left arm straight through the beetle’s eye. “Gaah!”

“Gigiiiiiiii!”

She plunged her arm in, all the way up to the elbow, and unleashed a blast of lightning right into the beetle’s brain. “Lightning Blast!”

“Greeeech!”

Dammit, it’s still not dead!

The Adamas Beetle howled and squirmed, but it was moving. Its tough inner carapace had prevented the lightning from frying it from the inside out.

“Graaaaargh!”

The beetle flailed in pain, ripping off Fran’s left arm with the jagged remains of its carapace.

“Agh!”

Fran! Greater Heal! Antidote! Greater Heal!

“Huff...huff...”

I pummeled Fran with healing spells, holding her body in place with Telekinesis. Instant Regeneration replaced her arm, but it took a huge toll on her mana.

The attacks from these two creatures were so strange. The demon

was a mage type with Sword Mastery 6. It couldn't have landed a hit on Fran that easily, even with gaps in her defense.

I Identified the demon again, and finally realized exactly what was going on. *Illusion Magic! That explains it!*

The demon only had Illusion Magic 4, but that was probably stronger than you'd expect—strong enough to cast not only visual illusions, but other illusions as well. This was our first time fighting an enemy like that. We had to rethink our approach.

I used all my Sensory Skills to observe the demon's attack. Finally, I found that strange sensation's source: the demon had localized his illusion to his sword arm. The illusion completely cloaked his real arm's actions, right down to the sounds that it made. My Telekinesis blocked the demon's poison sword just as it was about to land another hit.

Teacher?

Keep going! Let me worry about defense.

"Hm!"

Fran started laying down punishment on the demon. It fought back, but every time it tried to use Illusion Magic, I was there to crush it flat.

Not this time, buddy. I already know your tricks!

I might not have sensed the enemy horde instinctively, like Fran and Jet did back in Schwarz Katze, but seeing through sensory illusions was child's play for me—perhaps because I had no sensory organs to begin with. I had no real idea how I saw or heard anything, because I certainly didn't have eyes or ears. What's more, I couldn't feel very much, and taste and smell were completely off the table. *Can't fool my senses if I don't have any.*

"Giiii!"

I've seen that one before, too!

"Gigi?"

I had also figured out the Adamas Beetle's trick charge. The demon created an illusion of the beetle, cloaking the real one and rendering it invisible. A mean trick, but easy to deal with once you knew what to look for: the small disturbance the real beetle caused in the wind. Of course, the whole thing was much easier now that the

beetle was half-blind.

Thanks, Fran! I fired off another spell, sticking to defense to avoid the beetle's Magic Resistance.

Turn Shield! That bent space to redirect an enemy's trajectory. The beetle's inertia was hard to overcome, but I shifted its charge with a bit of mana grease and telekinesis.

"Guaaa!"

"Giii?"

The beetle ended up barreling straight for the demon. I didn't need the attack to do much damage. All I needed was an opening. The demon jumped out of the beetle's way, and... *Go, Fran!*

"Haaaa!"

She split the demon clean through its midsection so quickly that I wasn't sure the creature realized it was defeated. On the return slash, she cut through its crystal. There really was no beating her in this sword fight.

"Giii!"

"Too slow!"

The Adamas Beetle was getting desperate. It charged us even faster than before, forcing itself to use what mana it had left to provide power and acceleration. It couldn't control itself, but that became part of its strategy. It would skewer the demon's remains if it meant it could kill Fran in the process. Pretty damned smart for a bug, but also easy to read, now that the beetle wasn't concealed behind the demon's illusion.

With nowhere left to run, I welcomed the beetle's charge with a well-placed Telekinetic Catapult, killing it instantly.

All right! Only the Crimson Wolf left!

"Hm!"

We rushed to Jet's aid immediately, but it didn't look like he needed our help.

"Grooooo!"

"Gaooo..."

Jet had kept his distance and chipped away at the Crimson Wolf with Deadly Poison. Jet was smaller and weaker, but the Crimson Wolf's

eyes were purple with poison, and patches of its fur fell out as Jet's toxic magic rotted it from the inside. The wolf could barely even breathe any more.

However, it hadn't been an easy victory. The right half of Jet's face was badly burned, and his right eye was scorched back to an empty socket. He looked the worst of the two, but the Crimson Wolf hunched over, coughing up blood. It didn't have long left.

"Hrrrr!"

Jet saw the opening and bound the wolf's paws. The Crimson Wolf struggled to escape, but Jet went in for the throat.

"Grrr!"

"Eeegh...!"

The Crimson Wolf squealed as its windpipe collapsed. With no way to escape, it soon expired. Jet had won. He stood over the Crimson Wolf's body and let out a howl of victory.

"Awooooo!"

However, a moment later, he collapsed.

"Jet!"

Greater Heal!

We rushed to Jet's side, but my magic couldn't bring back his eye. He could regenerate it over time, but we didn't have that luxury right now. I took out a powerful potion and splashed it into the socket. Moments later, his eye began to regenerate.

You all right, Jet?

"Arf."

Fran and I showered him with petting.

You did it, boy!

"Very good."

"Woof!"

We couldn't rest for long, though. While I was at it, I gave Fran a potion to heal any lingering damage. It wouldn't cure her ever-present mental exhaustion, but it would have to do for now.

Come on! We still have an army to stop!

“Hm!”

Just let me absorb some crystals real quick. You don't mind, do you, Jet?

The Crimson Wolf was Jet's quarry, after all. It was polite to ask.

“Woof!”

After securing Jet's permission, I cut through the Crimson Wolf's heart. With this C-Rank crystal, I should...

You have reached a new Evolution level.

Nailed it! I was fully recovered, *and* I had EP to spend! That should make our next encounter easier.

Name: Teacher

User: Fran (Exclusive)

Race: Intelligent Weapon

Attack: 726; MP: 5500/5500; Durability: 5300/5300

Mana Conductivity: A +

Evolution: Rank 14; Crystal 9133/10500; Skill Capacity 138; EP 70

I must have gotten a little too excited, because I startled Fran.

“What happened, Teacher?”

I ranked up! I've got seventy EP, and my MP's fully recovered.

“Nice.”

You guys got three levels of EXP, too.

That was still pretty good, considering that it took an ordinary man up to forty years to hit Level 40. On top of that, Fran earned a new title: *Destroyer of Monsters*.

Destroyer of Monsters: bequeathed after killing a hundred to a thousand monsters in one's life.

Effect: increases stats in proportion to the number of monsters fought.

That title normally took an entire lifetime to achieve, but Fran had basically been fighting one constant battle since she met me. What's more, the fight we were in right now involved a wide variety of monsters. That must have contributed to earning the title.

As for my EP... No, I'll think about it on our way back. We have a monster army to stop.

"Hm."

I stored the Crimson Wolf's carcass, and Fran hopped on Jet's back.

After them, Jet.

"Woof!"

"A hundred White Rhinos stand ready to charge, Lord Ligdartha!"

"Very well. Deploy them immediately."

"Sir!"

My name is Ligdartha, chief of the White Rhino Tribe and provisional general of the Beastman Nation. Incorporating tribal representatives into the military chain of command is common custom here.

"The enemy's movements still bother me," I said.

"How so, sir?" asked Fardelt, my second-in-command.

It was a difficult question to answer, because I couldn't quite put my finger on it. There was just something off about the way these Basharlians fought.

First of all, Basharlians were notoriously terrible at warfare, but they responded much more quickly than I expected. Perhaps they'd learned from their mistakes, or employed a skilled tactician? But then, they did not press the advantage of their superior numbers, or try to advance in any way. It was as if they *wanted* a stalemate right on our border. I couldn't understand why, since these plains were their only way in from Basharl. They should have turned this whole area into a

beachhead to advance on our cities, but instead, they just...sat here.

Even after we met them in battle, their plan didn't make any sense. Their soldiers were as incompetent as ever: men with a deep hatred of beastmen, charging in with no hope of victory. If they *had* employed a brilliant tactician, then he hadn't imbued them with any new strategy or hope for victory. At least, none that I saw in their eyes.

If anything, it was as if they weren't even *trying* to win. They had to be plotting something, but what? Did they expect support from their allied kingdoms? Had they already sown seeds of discord within the Beastman Nation somehow? Or was this just the desperate flailing of patriotic soldiers?

"Are you not overthinking things, sir?" Fardelt asked.

"I hope I am. Either way, if we crush them now, all their plotting will be for naught. Make ready to attack."

"Yes, sir!"

"I doubt they expect us to dispatch a sortie so quickly."

"We'll show those Basharlian cowards the power of the White Rhinos!"

"That we will. First, their right flank! I want their captain's head on a platter!"

The monsters had obtained a huge lead while we fought the elites. As Jet rushed to catch up, I consulted Fran on my next EP investment.

Is there anything you want?

"Mana Control."

Sure. That sounds like a great idea.

Fran had gotten good results from upgrading Spirit Manipulation to Spirit Control, so it followed that this would have a similar effect on her magic. That would certainly prove useful in the battle to come.

"What about you, Teacher?"

I'm leveling up Mana Drain.

That was currently at Level 9; it would be vital for replenishing our magic whilst battling the remaining horde. And I had somehow acquired another skill in our previous encounter: Life Drain. I'd cracked crystals left, right, and center destroying our enemies, so it must have come from one of them. At first glance, the skill appeared to be the Life version of Mana Drain. Those two skills together should ease the burden of using life-depleting moves like Flashing Thunderclap.

I'll max them both out. There's no time to deliberate.

"All right."

All that mattered was acquiring skills that would be useful in our coming battle. I spent 5 EP to upgrade Mana Manipulation to Mana Control, and the effects were immediate.

"Wow!" said Fran. Her eyes widened in surprise.

You can say that again.

Even she noticed the skill's power. It took her mana-sensing abilities to the next level. It was like seeing the world with a new pair of eyes—like hearing without earplugs. The difference was probably even more pronounced than it had been with Spirit Control.

Now, let me max out Mana Drain.

Mana Drain is at Level 10. Acquired skill: Mana Steal.

Oh, a new skill! I'd have to figure out how to use it later. For now, I needed to level up Life Drain.

Life Drain is at Level 10. Acquired skill: Life Steal.

And another one! Life Steal must increase the absorption rate.

So far, I had spent five points on Mana Control, two points on Mana Drain, and eighteen points on Life Drain, for a total of 25 EP. I still had 45 EP left.

What else...?

"How about magic to stop the advancing horde?" Fran suggested.

Hrm.

It *would* be nice to have spells that stopped the monsters in their tracks...but which element would be best?

"Flame Magic?" Fran asked.

Let me think.

Flame was pretty powerful, and our second-highest element after Thunder, but we would have to be careful about starting a forest fire—it might spread to areas where there were refugees.

“What about Storm Magic?” Fran said. “That covers a lot of ground.”

Storms could rain destruction over vast areas, but I wasn’t sure that was what we needed either. If all we had to do was thin and scatter the horde, then Flame or Storm would’ve been perfect. However, we needed to protect the villagers. If they made it safely to Green Goat, victory would be ours, even if we didn’t kill a single monster.

So, we had to be careful with our attacks, and we certainly couldn’t afford to scatter the monsters. We had already killed the elites, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if the remaining forces turned and ran at the first sign of trouble. That could be a problem, especially if some fled in the same direction as the refugees. Tracking them all down might be impossible.

“Hrm.” Fran folded her arms in thought.

How about Land Magic? I suggested.

“Land Magic?”

Yeah, so we could make walls and ditches.

I recalled what Almarno had said about the Beastman Nation’s sole Land Mage—that he could halt an army with his spells.

“Hm! Good idea.”

Now’s our best chance to learn it. I could max it out with my EP.

“Go for it,” Fran agreed.

All right. I’m leveling it up now.

“Hm.”

I spent 4 EP to max out Earth Magic. Fran immediately earned the Earth Mage title, while I got Land Mage and Sand Mage. I’d forgotten that Sand was a mixture of Earth and Wind. However, the compound element would have to wait.

Now for Land Magic.

I got up to Level 4, but still couldn’t find what we needed. There was a bunch of powerful spells, but none could stop an army in its

tracks. I carried on investing, and after spending 25 EP to reach Land Magic 6, it finally appeared.

Here we go! I think this is the one.

Great Wall: Creates a large wall and ditch. Can grow to gigantic proportions, according to the mana charge.

Now we can stop the horde!

“Hm!”

The army of monsters had already reached the forest line. Eliminating them would be difficult once they scattered into the woods.

No!

“Should we attack?” Fran asked.

Strangely enough, however, the horde stopped. What was going on? It took me a moment to remember our fake fort. Instead of dispersing, the monsters advanced slowly to surround it.

I hadn’t expected the fort to be so effective. Fran and I set down some distance away to plan our next move. With the enemy stalled, it was time to build a few walls.

We’ll start with one, just to see.

“Hm.”

Charge it full of mana, and—Great Wall!

“Whooooa!”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet gasped, and I would have too, if I wasn’t so busy focusing. The wall appeared instantly: fifteen meters tall by five meters wide, and over fifty meters long! The spell used the soil around it to create the wall, leaving a great ditch behind and effectively creating both a wall and a moat in a single cast.

I’d spent over a hundred MP to max out the Great Wall, but I could work with this. In fact, I could probably chain cast it to cover a whole kilometer or more. No wonder Almarno said a single Land Mage could stop an entire army.

However, the wall wasn't enchanted, and it had no way of repairing itself if powerful monsters or spells damaged or destroyed it. That was a bit of a worry, as we could demolish it with a single blast if we wanted. I wasn't sure the wall could resist attacks from anything above a D-Threat.

Fortunately, no D-Threats were left in the horde anymore, and penetrating the great wall would be difficult for these smaller monsters. Without their more powerful units, the great wall was practically impregnable. Was the tide finally turning in our favor?

They probably noticed our little test run, so we don't have much time. I'll set up walls along the forest line.

"How will you do that?" Fran asked.

I'll level up Instant Cast and Double Mind. Then, I should be able to cast multiple spells at once.

I still needed to say a spell's name for Instant Cast to work, but what about its upgrade, No Cast? That might eliminate the need to even use the spell name. Paired with an upgraded Double Mind, there was a chance I could set up a long line of walls instantly.

That's the theory, anyway. What do you think?

"Hm. Worth a try."

All right, then!

I spent 10 EP on Instant Cast to unlock No Cast. Now, I could use a spell just by thinking about it. That was pretty cool! I used another 15 EP to power up Double Mind and unlocked Multi Mind. That was a powerful skill, allowing me to run about ten thought processes concurrently without losing my train of thought.

Theoretically, I could even cast multiple Kanna Kamuys at the same time, although the skill placed a huge toll on the brain. That made it difficult for Fran, who already got painful migraines from just attempting to use it.

"Urgh..."

Don't force yourself, Fran.

"Hm..."

Just watch my back as I make these walls.

"All right."

Here goes nothing!

I still needed to focus my mana. No Cast made it easier to cast multiple spells, but it didn't just cast any spell that crossed my mind. Instead, it made simultaneous casting a breeze.

Multicast! Great Wall!

A gigantic wall sprang up along the whole forest line, with a long, deep trench in front of it. It looked like the wall of a great city! However, I wasn't entirely pleased with the results.

That was rougher than I expected.

Great Wall certainly ate a lot more mana than I'd planned. It seemed as though No Cast lowered spell efficiency in exchange for instantaneous speed, and the cost scaled up the more spells I loaded in. What's more, there was no stopping it once I cast it. If I wasn't careful with my calculations, I'd end up with an empty mana pool.

On top of that, Great Wall only went in a straight line, and didn't allow for detailed adjustments. In future, I could manipulate the wall shape with a bit more mana, but this was sufficient for what we needed right now.

At the Great Wall's sudden appearance, the horde stopped in its tracks. I used their few moments of shock to throw up even more walls.

I'll be back.

"Hm."

I flew off, erecting multiple Great Walls in my wake—and slipping unnoticed past our enemies as giant walls seemingly shot up out of nowhere to arrest their advance.

That about does it!

Rather than just building one huge, unbroken wall along the forest edge, I made a path with walls on either side. The opening must have been about five hundred meters, but the farther in you went, the more it narrowed—like a funnel.

It was a good thing it was still dark, as you couldn't see how long the path was. Hopefully, that meant the monsters would be more inclined to rush through. I didn't know how well it would work, but even Fran's Nightvision couldn't reach the funnel end, so it would probably be fine. It was like the Battle of Changban from *The Romance*

of the Three Kingdoms.

Now, all we had to do was destroy the flood of monsters. First, though, we had to figure out what to do with any stragglers.

If the monsters' forces split in half, we'd eliminate whatever was left in the funnel, then set up a new set of Great Walls to channel the breakaway force into a second killing zone. If the worst happened, and the horde broke off in all directions, I would block off the back of the funnel and destroy the monsters inside. After that, Fran, Jet, and I might have to split up to contain the remainder. Fortunately, the horde showed no sign of using such tactics.

Let's see how they handle this.

"Hrm. They're coming this way."

The monsters panicked at the sudden appearance of the walls and ignored the fake fort to charge forward—attempting to power through whatever punishment might await. In any case, we were ready for them.

After a while, some monsters attacked the walls on either side. *Go for it, guys.* They were welcome to try, especially since breaking the walls would immediately smother them. Still, they lacked the firepower to even scratch the surface, and soon returned to advancing down the funnel. That brought the monsters toward us in a wave of sheer force.

Here they come!

"Hm!"

I was ready with a number of intricate strategies in case the monsters did anything strange, but it looked like we were going to be fine. I had placed a magic light over the bottleneck entrance and mussed Fran up a bit to make it look like she was worn out, and they had a chance of beating her.

"Let's go, Teacher!"

I've got your back!

The monsters charged blindly through the darkness, and Fran and I were ready to meet the torrent. Bodies piled up around us as the

beasts fell by sword and magic. Not a single monster slipped past as they attempted to climb over their comrades' bodies. We'd already sent Jet away to hunt for any scouts.

The monsters had stopped dead when they first saw the walls, and while some of that was shock, their reaction was too uniform to be accidental. They were waiting for someone's orders. Thus, there was a chance that the army had dedicated lookouts searching for a way to circumvent the funnel. Perhaps they were already finding the walls' edges, even as their compatriots fixated on Fran.

Jet's mission was to find these monsters and kill them, cutting off their flow of information. Either way, we could manage this lot without him. In fact, not having him around worked in our favor; the monsters focused all their attention on Fran.

"Haaaa!"

No entry for you!

"Gyaooooo!"

"Hmph! Too easy!"

Get ready for an explosion!

In a fight against lots of small monsters, Fran and I were basically invincible. Mana Control sharpened our perception of the horde's mana signatures until we knew the makeup of almost the entire army. There were no C-Threats around, and very few D-Threats. Still, there was strength in numbers, and some monsters had stealth skills, so we couldn't let our guard down. We couldn't try to annihilate them all at once either—that might make the survivors flee and scatter. Instead, we opened the battle with the sword, using as few spells as possible.

"Urgh!"

Fran, you don't have to get hit on purpose!

"I'm fine!"

Fran let a goblin strike her to sell the illusion that the monsters were winning. Fortunately, the attack landed on the toughest part of her armor. She was careful to ensure that the blows could be easily healed, but even so, I thought it was a bit much. Still, I didn't try to talk her out of it. She was prepared to do anything if it meant her fellow Black Cats could escape.

As a sidenote, Mana Steal and Life Steal turned out to be very powerful. They drained the life and mana out of our enemies without us even having to make contact, creating an aura of absorption. That would probably make them dangerous to use around allies, but we didn't have to worry about that tonight. Since I was technically part of Fran's equipment, the drain didn't affect her either. Even better, I had already recovered nearly all the mana I spent on the Great Walls.

By now, Fran and I had been fighting for close to an hour, and the sky was starting to pale. I kept expecting the horde to find a way around the funnel, but so far, they'd continued to pile into it. I was even close to ranking up again. We'd annihilated almost half the army when they suddenly stopped fighting.

What now?!

Fran pressed the advantage and charged, but a chill ran down my spine. I immediately Short Jumped us away.

KABOOM!

The only thing left in the spot where Fran had just been was a five-meter-wide crater. *Good thing I saw that coming!*

"Thanks, Teacher."

No problem. Where the hell did that come from?

All I could tell was that the attack was from the monsters' rear lines. It had flown at a terrifying speed, and it was powerful enough to pierce our barriers. It seemed too fast and powerful for anything a goblin archer was capable of. If I'd been a second too late, Fran could have been mortally wounded.

Where did it come from?

We looked for our mysterious bowman, and found despair.

What...? No...

We sensed their mana first. A new squadron emerged from behind the horde; most were weak E-Threats, but D-Threats were in their midst, and they totaled at least a thousand.

They marched across the plains in a wave while the sun rose behind them, shining on their silver armor. They all wore uniforms, moving in a tight formation that should have been impossible for monsters. Their silver armor was impressive enough, but only Fiends

lay underneath; they were an entire army of hobgoblins, High Orcs, and Minotaurs.

It can't be... We were so close to winning! I said, dismayed.

There're lots of them, Fran agreed.

Is that their army's main force? Have we only been fighting the vanguard...?

They're all strong, too.

Can you still do it, Fran? I had to ask. Faced with this many foes, I couldn't blame her for losing hope.

Of course, she said. *We'll beat anything that comes our way.*

I should have expected it, frankly. That was my girl. She really was incredible.

You're right, I agreed.

Hm!

We couldn't fold now. Not if we wanted to save the Black Cats.

We'll win this, I said.

"For sure!"

Chapter 6: The Battlemaiden and the Faceless Knight

THAT SQUADRON of Fiends had come out of nowhere.

We have to push them back! I said.

Uh-huh. Seeing them only fanned the flames in Fran's heart. However, one question remained. *Where did they come from?*

How had such a formidable force appeared unnoticed?

I didn't even feel them coming, I said.

Hm.

Maybe we were too preoccupied with fighting the monsters?

Or maybe they used some kind of spell or skill, Fran suggested.

I studied the squadron before us. The front lines were hobgoblin pikemen with archers and mages behind them. Then came High Orcs with their warriors, shieldmen, blademen, and snipers. Last of all were Minotaur soldiers and lancers.

The hobgoblins were E-Threats, while the orcs and Minotaurs were D-Threats. However, there were elite guards behind them: Minotaur high mages, high swordsmen, and axemashers who were more like C-Threats than anything. The high mages could use Flame Magic, and the high swordsmen had Advanced Sword Mastery.

Among the squadron were Minotaur dark paladins—C-Threats who stood head and shoulders above their kinsmen. They had access to Dark Magic, as well as Advanced Axe Mastery and Advanced Shield Mastery. Four of these powerful Fiends stood shoulder to shoulder, and they weren't even the commanders.

The Minotaurs formed a protective wall around their commander and her lieutenant. I identified them, and a chill ran down my blade. The mob of powerful Fiends was dangerous enough, but their leaders were on a different scale. If Fran and I didn't have to defend this line, I would have teleported us the hell out of here.

Name: Valkyrie Killarcher

Race: Faerie; Tenma

Level: 66

HP: 1352; **Magic:** 2387; **Strength:** 682; **Agility:** 1339

Skills: Intimidate 6; Hidden 3; Stealth 10; Wind Magic 7; Bow Arts 10; Advanced Bow Arts 5; Bow Mastery 10; Advanced Bow Mastery 5; Fear Resistance 7; Vigilance 4; Presence Sense 5; Conceal Presence 7; Illusion Magic 6; Sword Arts 8; Sword Mastery 8; Brute Force 6; Confusion Resistance 7; Regeneration 8; Command 8; Abnormal Status Resistance 6; Spear Arts 10; Advanced Spear Arts 4; Spear Mastery 10; Advanced Spear Mastery 4; Elemental Blade 7; Vigor 4; Light Magic 4; Mana Sense 6; Mana Thruster 6; Darkvision; Spirit Control; Battlefield Frenzy; Dull Pain; Steadfast; Walking Assistance; Mana Regeneration; Mana Manipulation

Class Skill: Battlemaiden

Titles: Vanguard Battlemaiden

Equipment: Battlemaiden Spear; Battlemaiden Bow; Battlemaiden Outfit

Name: Dullahan

Race: Specter

Level: 1

HP: 1588; **Magic:** 693; **Strength:** 781; **Agility:** 587

Skills: Frighten 5; Stealth 4; Flame Magic 3; Presence Sense 6; Fear 9; Conceal Presence 3; Sword Arts 10; Advanced Sword Arts 2; Brute Force 8; Instant Regeneration 3; Abnormal Status Resistance 9; Shield Mastery 10; Advanced Shield Mastery 4; Shield Arts 2; Advanced Shield Arts 4; Mental Status Resistance 9; Elemental Blade 7; Fire Magic 10; Magic Resistance 6; Mana Sense 8; Mana Drain 7; Thunder Resistance 4; Darkvision; Spirit Manipulation; Pain Immunity; Mana Manipulation

Titles: Faceless Knight

Equipment: Fiendstone Knightsword; Anti-Mana Full Plate; Anti-Mana Shield; Barrier Ring

A Valkyrie and a Dullahan, two of the strongest creatures in folklore. The Valkyrie was clearly a B-Threat, and the Dullahan was almost as strong. Both were well-balanced fighters with few weaknesses.

The Valkyrie's strength was particularly tremendous. Her shining blonde hair was matched only by the glory of her armor, glinting in the morning sun. She looked more divine than monstrous, but I felt her hostility even from here.

By contrast, the Dullahan was a large humanoid in full plate armor. It wasn't clutching its head, but I couldn't see whether anything was under its helmet. It was barely noticeable standing next to the brilliant Valkyrie, but the prospect of hardly being able to detect such a powerful monster was more terrifying than reassuring.

Worse still, the Dullahan and Valkyrie had some deeply unpleasant skills to go with their dangerously high stats. The Valkyrie's Class Skill, Battlemaiden, increased her battle arts and masteries and heightened her senses. Her title, Vanguard Battlemaiden, was just as terrifying.

Vanguard Battlemaiden: title bequeathed to worthy Valkyries.

Effects: applies the Valkyrie's Stealth and Movement Skills to an army with more than a hundred members.

Reduced effectiveness if army members are not under her direct control.

This title was overkill. That was why Fran and I had failed to notice the sudden influx of Fiends! Was this whole army under the Valkyrie's influence? Perhaps we only found them as fast as we did because they weren't under her direct control. Then again, maybe we could've spotted them faster without it. The Dullahan's skills weren't much better. Its Faceless Knight was straightforward but dangerous, increasing its Regeneration and Absorption Skills.

Given the powerful army at her command, that Valkyrie might as well have been an A-Threat.

"I must applaud your reflexes," said the Valkyrie, speaking directly into Fran's ear with Wind Magic. "You did well to avoid my

arrows.”

“Who are you?” Fran responded with a spell of her own.

“So,” said the Valkyrie, “you can use magic. Very well. I am a servant of Lady Murelia. The Valkyrie who controls the army before you.”

“Murelia? She’s behind this attack?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

“Why are you doing this?” Fran asked.

“Ah, so you are unaware. It has nothing to do with you. If you surrender now, I shall grant you a swift death.”

“I was about to tell you the same thing,” said Fran.

“You think you can defeat me? Mere monsters exhaust you.”

“I can defeat you easily.”

“Bwa ha ha ha!” the Valkyrie laughed. “I like your spirit, girl! I didn’t expect such willful prey when I left for the killing fields today! Come then, entertain us with your struggle!”

The Valkyrie sounded more like a hunter than a mindless blood knight—she savored hunting and killing her prey more than anything.

“Archers!” she cried. “Loose your arrows!”

Who was this “Murelia” person? A dungeon master? I wanted to get more information out of this Valkyrie, but that wasn’t going to happen right now. The Fiend archers obeyed her command, releasing a pelting rain of arrows upon us. The battle began.

Damn it! We have to fend these monsters off first! I told Fran.

I blocked the funnel with Great Walls while Fran handled the incoming volley of arrows. If we were taking on these Fiends, we had to stop the rest of the army from advancing first. I figured these walls would be enough to block them.

“Hellflame Arrow!”

The Valkyrie fired a burning missile right into my new walls. The arrowhead’s immense mana gathered power and heat as it flew through the air. It pierced goblins and orcs alike, then struck the wall and exploded, blowing the structure into pieces.

Tch! I set up more Great Walls to replace it.

“Bwa ha ha! Hellflame Arrow!” The Valkyrie destroyed the walls just as quickly.

How is she doing that so fast?! All my efforts were useless. I could only watch as the monsters rushed through the giant hole she’d blown in our defenses. Damn it!

“We can’t let them through!” cried Fran. “Urgh!”

Careful! Watch out for the arrows, Fran!

“Hm!”

When we tried to get in front of the monsters and halt their advance, more arrows rained down on us. It was impossible—there was no way we could fight back the Fiend army, hold off the Valkyrie and her elite unit, *and* avoid the hail of arrows. We needed to stop fighting the army long enough to deal with her, but Fran wouldn’t allow that.

What else could we do? Was there anything?

I activated Multi Mind and searched frantically for an answer. The Valkyrie’s presence meant that I couldn’t erect walls to block off the monsters. The only option left was to try and decimate their forces.

Ekato Keraunos could cover a lot of ground with its hundred lightning bolts. Multiple castings would annihilate the weaker monsters and paralyze the survivors. However, over three thousand of these bastards were left. Casting Ekato Keraunos that many times would drain my mana dry, leaving me with nothing left to fight the Valkyrie and her guard.

If I absorbed crystals, I could recover from the mana loss, but that would take a *lot* of crystals. There was no chance I had time. Was there a way to absorb hundreds at once...?

Yes. Yes, there was. And I might just be able to do it. I activated Transmogrify, and found that Mana Control and Spirit Control made it easier to alter my shape—*much* easier. I almost couldn’t believe it. Now we had a fighting chance!

The best way to do this was to use as much mana as I could in the initial attack. I was about to rank up again, and I didn’t want to waste the full recovery that would happen when I did.

Take this!

I fired off a chain of Ekato Keraunos, covering the battlefield with

hundreds and hundreds of lightning bolts. I didn't have time to aim, but there was so much lightning that I didn't think it'd matter. This should've been more than enough to put a dent in the monsters' forces. As lightning struck on all sides, they scattered, leaving only charred corpses behind.

I let the Valkyrie's guard have a taste, too. I hoped the lightning would be powerful enough to distract them, although if it managed to kill a few, then all the better.

You'll have to take care of yourself for a bit, Fran!

"Hm!"

I couldn't waste a single ounce of focus. I turned off all my Sensory and Vigilance Skills to concentrate on Transmogrify.

I'll be taking your crystals! All of them!

I knew I couldn't Transmogrify my blade—that would leave Fran defenseless in the heat of battle. Instead, I used it on the tassels hanging from my hilt. They regenerated along with the rest of me, so I knew they counted as part of my body. I should've been able to control them the same way I controlled my blade.

I split my tassels into ten steel threads and stretched them into the air, infusing them with mana until they spread out like tree branches. One tassel became ten, and ten became a hundred, until they covered the entire battleground—absorbing every crystal they pierced.

Urgh...come on...just a little bit more...aaargh!

The micromanagement was much more challenging than the mana drain. I might not have had a brain, but I was getting a splitting headache!

Yes...I can feel it!

Mana surged back through the steel threads toward me.

My second rank up for the day!

My crystal counter jumped as soon as I finished absorbing. Now I had an extra 75 EP! I couldn't waste time celebrating, though. I hit a wall; the steel threads began to unravel against my will. *Tch...I guess that's the limit of what I can do with Transmogrify.*

I made the best of it with one final attack. *Stun Bolt!*

Fifty Stun Bolts spread over the spiderweb of threads, paralyzing

all the monsters touching it. The chain of attacks starting with Ekato Keraunos and ending with Stun Bolt killed almost a thousand monsters, and incapacitated as many again.

That worked. Kind of.

You okay, Teacher? Fran asked.

Y-yeah...

I felt almost limp, although in truth, it was more of a phantom sensation—like malaise or despondency. That was probably the cost of using so many simultaneous skills and spells. I needed to do more research on Multi Mind. *But that will have to wait. Time to push everything to its absolute limit.*

If I didn't get my act together, Fran would have to cover for me. At least Ekato Keraunos had done its job—the Fiends would probably attack again soon, but they had stopped for the time being. We just had to deal with the remaining monsters.

“Gyagyuuu...”

“Arf...”

“Arooo...”

We'd eliminated all the monsters directly surrounding Fran, and we had a little breathing room. Unfortunately, the ones left were now completely terrified of her, and tried to flee as soon as she looked at them. That wasn't good. We had to kill them before they got away. Maybe another round of magic would do it?

As I tried to figure it out, Wind Magic carried the Valkyrie's voice across the battlefield. “Amazing! I am somewhat impressed by your display.”

She didn't seem alarmed, despite how many of her monsters I'd just annihilated. I guessed that I hadn't done much damage to her guard yet.

She seemed angrier with her forces than with Fran. “Worthless creatures! You should be ashamed to call yourselves servants of Lady Murelia! You are useful only as cannon fodder! Redeem yourselves by striking at the enemy, even if it costs you your lives! For the glory of Lady Murelia!”

Under normal circumstances, such orders would result in

desertion, but the monsters only roared in agreement.

“Groaaargh!”

“Gyuuuuu!”

“Raaaargh!”

Something wasn’t right here. “For the glory of Lady Murelia” was like an incantation. Suddenly, the whole army looked prepared to die. They stared at Fran with pure hatred in their bloodshot eyes. If they were going to perish, they would take this little girl down with them.

Before Fran and I figured out what was going on, they rushed us. *These bastards aren’t afraid to die!*

We cut them down one after the other, but they just kept on coming. These guys were on a suicide mission! It was like they *wanted* to die.

Fran was under attack from all sides and tiring, but she still grinned. “You’re right where I want you!”

So long as the monsters focused on her, they weren’t going after the Black Cats.

“Raaaah!” Fran roared, cutting her enemies down with a dancing blade.

If we could somehow stem the tide, we only had the Valkyrie and her guard left to worry about. That felt like a single ray of hope, shining through this battlefield of despair. Unfortunately, it wasn’t to be.

“The arrows!” Fran cried.

The elites shot another volley, waiting for Fran to tire. They weren’t even worried about killing their allies, so long as they hurt Fran.

So, this is what they’re planning! Will our barriers hold—Fran!

“Gah!” Fran sensed their killing intent and twisted away, but not quite quickly enough. An arrow pierced the monster in front of her and shattered her right shoulder. “Urgh...”

Healing you now!

I held her shoulder in place with Telekinesis and teleported us a short distance away. It was just as well that I did. A moment later, an arrow exploded right where we’d stood.

Hang in there, Fran!

I blinked us a good distance away again, healing Fran's shattered shoulder at the same time.

What hit me? she asked.

The Valkyrie's arrow!

It had come from behind a cover of suicidal monsters—flying straight for us instead of raining down from overhead. It went through a dozen of the Valkyrie's soldiers without losing speed, aimed straight at Fran's heart. If Fran hadn't noticed it, she would've been dead. How many times did she have to brush death today?!

Good job catching it when you did.

"I...guess."

Fran's instincts were as sharp as ever, but we couldn't keep dodging these arrows all day. On the other hand, if we tried to get closer, the Valkyrie would probably turn Fran into a pincushion. We needed to come up with a plan, so I kept teleporting us out of the way.

Fran, let's level up your Sense Skills. If you can't react quickly enough, you'll get killed.

"Hm. Go for it."

Shall I do it for you?

"Do it. I trust you."

I couldn't let Fran down. I had to pick the right skills and fast! I took full advantage of Multi Mind to work out the best fit.

This one!

First up was Danger Sense—I maxed it out for 16 EP, which unlocked Enhanced Senses. It was only another 12 EP to buy, so I did that, too. Both skills were crucial in sensing incoming threats, but I didn't stop there. It was better to err on the side of overkill. I took the Reaction Speed Up that I got from the Crimson Wolf and dumped 18 EP into it, looking for a certain skill.

There you are! I only had 29 EP left, but I finally got what I needed. *Hello, Heightened Reflexes!*

Fran already got this skill as a buff from Flashing Thunderclap, so I knew how powerful it was—it allowed her to react to attacks even I

couldn't see coming. Heightened Reflexes was how Gaudartha had outpaced Fran, despite her being much faster. It should greatly increase our Sense Skills' strength.

I can see them!

I had to concentrate, but I was finally able to swat the Valkyrie's arrows away with Telekinesis. At last, we had some foothold against those things!

"Wow! This is great, Teacher!"

However, the battlemaiden's sensory abilities were much more powerful than I thought. We teleported every few seconds, and she was still firing arrows at us!

"Tch!" Fran's senses were sharper. She batted away the arrows with the back of her hand.

Good job, Fran!

"Hm!"

Time for our counterattack.

"Hm!" Fran readied me again.

The Valkyrie just kept grinning down at us. "Ha ha ha! Very good! To think that you can deflect my arrows!"

"You're not so bad yourself."

"Powerful words from one who almost lost her arm! What excellent news! How dull it would be if you died without a struggle!"

The Valkyrie loosed a slew of arrows, shouting with joy. She had fast arrows, arrows that exploded at the slightest touch, invisible arrows, and arrows that flew in a wide arc. None were easy to dodge, and one in three still hit us, even with all the Sense Skills I'd upgraded. I didn't want to think about what would have happened to us without those new skills.

I watched for more of the Valkyrie's fast arrows, since they were her most dangerous attack, but none came. Maybe they weren't as easy to use as I'd thought? At any rate, there was no way we'd win this by staying on the defensive.

Almost done! I told Fran.

Hm! She bought me some time while I prepared our next attack.

Take this! Kanna Kamuy!

I chanted the spell name; it just felt as though it would have more oomph that way. Still, No Cast allowed me to cast two of the spells at once. Surely, that would finish the fight!

However, the stress of casting it twice was terrible. Just as bad as pushing my limits with Transmogrify, if not worse.

Aaargh...! I didn't have any teeth, but I felt as though I gritted them, trying to control the spell.

The sky opened, and pillars of lightning crashed down on the Valkyrie just as she drew her bow. I wanted to give her as little time to react as possible. Two lightning dragons thumped into the earth, swallowing her whole.

Score! Surely even that Valkyrie will die after that kind of... Wait.

I should have remembered that it was bad luck to celebrate a victory before you won. I'd completely forgotten about the Dullahan. It reappeared behind the Valkyrie, towering over her and covering her with its shield.

When Kanna Kamuy struck, I knew they would survive. The Dullahan's defense was tremendous, and it had Advanced Shield Mastery, Magic Resistance, Anti-Mana Shield, *and* Full Plate, as well as its Barrier Ring. Thunder Resistance on top of all that felt like a personal attack at this point.

In the end, the results were even worse than I'd expected. White smoke wisped from the Dullahan's body. Its HP was reduced to half, but that was all. Instant Regeneration would soon wipe even that out. Worse, the Dullahan only lost a fraction of its mana pool, while mine was almost empty.

How could you block that? That spell killed a hydra in one hit!

Kanna Kamuy and Black Thunderfall had defeated Phelms in the fighting tournament, and I'd been sure a direct hit would kill the Valkyrie...but the Dullahan's defense was too great. It even dispersed the impact so that there was no explosion.

Dammit! How the hell did it manage to do that?!

"Teacher, look."

Huh?

I followed Fran's gaze and saw that the Minotaur dark paladins and High Orc shieldmen were burnt to a crisp. The shieldmen were all dead, and only two of the four dark paladins were standing.

What had happened to them? They couldn't have died from my attack's impact—the Dullahan had dispersed it. And all the other orcs and Minotaurs were still healthy.

Did the Dullahan transfer the damage?

Somehow, the dark paladins and shieldmen had taken the brunt of Kanna Kamuy's damage, although I had no idea how. At any rate, the result was that we'd killed over a hundred of their elites...but at the cost of our greatest weapon.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! To think...a Grand Spell!" said the Valkyrie. "Excellent!"

"..."

She laughed to hide her cold sweat, while the Dullahan stood silently beside her. As we watched, it laid its gauntlet on a nearby monster.

"Gyoo? Gahya...!"

"..."

The creature withered up and died, and the Dullahan moved on to the next one. Somehow, it was absorbing their mana. This was bad. This was *really* bad. There was no point now in trying to exhaust the Dullahan's mana; this whole army was basically its external mana tank.

On top of that, it would be difficult to hit them with Kanna Kamuy again. They were now moving targets, and the slight delay between casting and activation would give them plenty of time to get away.

We need to get closer and prevent her from using the bow. We're helpless at this range.

Got it, said Fran.

She closed in, zigzagging to avoid shots from the Valkyrie's bow. The monsters around her reacted by trying to dogpile her, but they were no match for Fran's reflexes. She avoided the Valkyrie's arrows and cut a path toward her.

I avoided teleportation as much as possible—if we overused it, the

Valkyrie would quickly learn to anticipate our path. Still, avoiding her attacks, the monsters, and the Fiends all at once was too much. We had to do something.

If we got close enough, the Valkyrie would have to stop using her bow. At the very least, that would reduce the damage she could do with it. I only hoped that she was less skilled at melee range. Still, could we really defeat that thing up close...?

I thought of maxing out other elements, running through dozens of options that might help. In the end, I decided against it. It would be a terrible decision to waste all this precious EP in a panic. If I leveled up anything, it should be sword-related. Maybe Sword King? That was definitely a skill worth having.

I'd just chosen Sword King when I discovered that, for some reason, I couldn't level it up. Every time I tried, the P.A.'s cold voice prevented it. *Skill requirements not met.*

That was frustrating, but I wasn't out of the game yet. There was still Advanced Sword Arts—that should provide a good defense for the Valkyrie's Advanced Bow Arts.

Fran agreed, so I went ahead. *Eighteen points into Advanced Sword Mastery it is!*

“Hm!”

The effects were immediate.

Advanced Sword Mastery is now Level 10.

Acquired skill: Enhanced Sword Arts.

Requirements met.

Acquired Unique Skill: Sword King Arts.

Sword Arts have been integrated into Sword King Arts.

Acquired Sword King Arts and Sword King Mastery.

Acquired Unique Skill: Sword God's Blessing.

Fran has acquired Sword God's Blessing. Unlocked Class: Sword King.

A torrent of announcements came out of the P.A. I almost didn't

catch them all, but the most important one was the Sword God's Blessing. I felt a clear, definite improvement in Fran's sword arm through my hilt. It was as if we somehow blended together.

Sword God's Blessing: a blessing on the battlefield for sword wielders.

Well, that was vague! I didn't know exactly how it worked, but I guessed that Fran was stronger now. I mean, it was the blessing of a *god*, so it had to be of some use, right?

"What's this? You have grown faster." Even the Valkyrie was surprised. Her expression grew grim, but she didn't panic yet. "Kill her, my minions!"

Still, Fran's swordsmanship wasn't the only thing that had improved. "Advanced Sword Art: Circle Impact."

Fran took her newly acquired skill for a spin. She turned in a tight circle, cutting down the monsters around her. Enhanced Sword Arts was more effective than I'd thought. Everything had improved: Fran's rotation speed, the area of effect, and the damage she dealt. She immediately split twenty of the monsters around us in half.

"Sword Sonic!"

And there was the upgraded version of Sonic Wave. The shock wave cut a path through the monsters ahead. Fran rushed down it before they had a chance to block her. The Valkyrie's guards were directly in front of us now. *Now for the real battle!*

Go right for the Valkyrie!

"Hm!" Fran sped up until she was almost a blur.

"Taaah!"

"Gyagyo!"

She cut through the hobgoblins who stood in her path. As strong as they were, they were no match for Fran. However...

"Tch!"

There's no end to them!

"Gyogyo!"

“Gegyagya!”

The Fiends surrounded Fran. Their shouts sounded like the usual babbling between goblins and orcs, but I knew they were signaling each other to hold her down. They might’ve been individually weak, but together, they were still a force to reckon with. The monsters piled on fearlessly, backing off only when Fran gave chase, then thrusting their spears forward to slow her advance.

Some Fiends even tried to latch onto her, despite the almost-certain chance of death. They were set on killing Fran, even if it cost their lives. Was it because they all came from the same dungeon? Or was their solidarity due to the Valkyrie’s Battlefield Frenzy? Either way, the Fiends wore down our health with a barrage of Spear Arts and Bow Arts, damaging us faster than Mana Sap and Life Sap could absorb.

“Ugh!”

“You really have improved your reflexes!” said the Valkyrie. “That was excellent!”

She perched atop an Earth Magic mound, firing arrows into the slightest opening. As much as I wanted to fight back, the Dullahan beside her would block any reckless attacks. I would only waste mana.

“Hmph. I suppose it is time I got serious,” she added. “You have done damage enough to our forces.”

Was she finally about to show her real strength?

“But tell me,” she asked, “why do you fight?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you risk your life against the horde? Is someone employing you? I see no reason to be so bold for mere coin. You fight as if you intend to destroy us completely.”

“You’re not going through here,” Fran said simply.

“Oh?”

“I’m going to protect everyone.”

The Valkyrie nodded slowly. “The Black Cats.”

“Hm!”

“Ka ha ha! What a moving tale! That a single Black Cat would risk her life for the sake of her village! I may cry,” she said, mocking us

openly. “Do you really think we are the only forces in Lady Murelia’s army?”

“...!”

“There are two more squadrons: one coming from the east and one from the west, both moving toward Green Goat. They may not be so powerful as us, but their captains are more than capable of destroying your little friends.”

“...!”

“The squadrons may be small in number, but they are shock troopers, trained to cut through the beast knights’ ranks.”

I felt Fran’s hand shiver. The Valkyrie was getting into her head!

Teacher, is she...

She’s telling the truth, but don’t let her provoke you! The villagers can’t have arrived in Green Goat yet, and there’s nothing we can do to help them right now. All we can do is hope and pray that the adventurers are prepared! I had to calm her down.

Fran wasn’t listening. “All right,” she told the Valkyrie. “I’ll just have to kill you quickly so I can go help them.”

Fran, that’s exactly what she wants! She’s trying to make you panic!

“Even so,” the Valkyrie taunted, “will you have time? You can forget about military help. Your armies need supplies and resources; ours can march on mana alone.”

“I’ll kill you!” Fran growled.

“You are welcome to try!”

No, Fran, don’t take the bait! It was too late, though. There was no stopping her.

“Flashing Thunderclap!”

Fran wanted to finish this as fast as possible. If I tried to talk her out of it, I’d only make her hesitate, and I’d likely get her killed. All I could do now was support her, keeping up our mana and Life Sap while Fran did what she had to.

I hadn’t given up on her yet. If Fran let her instincts control the flow of battle, it might even help us out. After all, that was a beastman’s most natural way of fighting.

Teacher, teleport!

All right!

I blinked us high above the enemies, but the Valkyrie's next arrow rushed toward us all the same. Somehow, she had learned to read our teleportation path. However, I'd expected this. Before the arrow struck us, I activated Dimension Shift. Immediately, our Danger Sense and Vigilance sharpened. I swatted the Valkyrie's fast arrow straight out of the air.

Still, I had to be careful, or I'd burn straight through my mana pool. At least that would help Fran to make this fight a short one.

"Haaaa!"

Fran was quickly wiping that smug grin off the Valkyrie's face. "I didn't think Timespace Magic could be so troublesome!"

We dodged another flurry of attacks with a chain of short teleportation spells. To an outside observer, it might have looked as though Fran charged in recklessly, but in fact her instincts allowed her to watch like a predator stalking its prey. Her mind buzzed with a dozen ways to kill the Valkyrie, but cold animal frenzy guided her actions more than thought.

Step by step, Fran coaxed the Valkyrie to make more mistakes—sometimes allowing herself to be hurt, or dodging attacks that passed within inches of her body. Fran led the Valkyrie, dictating the flow of her attacks, until she was almost in front of the battlemaiden, covered in wounds.

The Valkyrie faltered for a split second. Fran charged right at her; it was the only opening she needed. "Sword King Arts: Skycutter!"

She brought down her sword with her newly learned Sword King Art. That was the only skill under Sword King Arts, perhaps because it was the only skill you needed. Its speed and power exceeded Pressurized Quickdraw, and it even accelerated time. It might not have been quite the same as a Timespace spell, but Unleash Potential further enhanced Fran's reflexes. My blade was so sharp that I felt myself cut through the air. My blade rang with it.

This attack would end the battle.

I saw the Dullahan's arm twitch as it reached to protect the Valkyrie, but even if it could cover her with its shield, it wasn't fast

enough to react in time. My blade sank into the Valkyrie's shoulder, cutting through her collarbone and all the way down to her heart.

"Gah...!"

Fran sliced the Valkyrie in two. I slashed through her heart, and even her crystal. I was sure that I did...yet I didn't absorb it. What was going on?

Doubt flashed through my mind. Somehow, something unbelievable had happened.

"...!"

Impossible!

The Valkyrie's fatal wound closed as quickly as it opened. How? She didn't have Instant Regeneration. Even if she did, surely no one could recover from a broken crystal, could they? Yet that's exactly what happened.

At the same time, the two remaining Minotaur dark paladins coughed up blood. I felt immense mana from their crystals flow through me. Somehow, I had absorbed those instead of the Valkyrie's.

It was the same damage transfer that blocked Kanna Kamuy!

What sort of trickery was this? Could the Valkyrie access the same skill the Dullahan had used earlier?

"Heh...ha ha ha ha! S-splendid!" the Valkyrie laughed. "My blood ran cold with that!"

She skipped backward to put distance between us. At least this time, she was honest enough to admit to her fear, but so what? That was a once-in-a-lifetime strike, and all Fran and I had to show for it was fear? We may have defeated the dark paladins, but we barely hurt the Valkyrie!

As she and the Dullahan retreated, the Fiends piled onto Fran.

The Valkyrie's going to attack us with arrows again!

"Out of the way!" Fran cried.

"Gegyagya!"

"Gyogyoa!"

There was no stopping the Fiends. They fought without fear, creating a living wall around the Valkyrie. Time was running short.

“Aaaargh!”

While Fran fought the Valkyrie, another battle raged in the forest to the south.

“Grrrr!”

“Move, you damn dog!”

A platoon of a hundred Fiends engaged a lone wolf. However, the platoon was no longer in perfect form—it had lost a good half its strength in the battle. The wolf suffered as well as the Fiends did everything they could to kill it. They were well equipped, and most could use magic. They even held formation with half their unit dead, fighting more like a human army than a violent gang of goblins and orcs.

The monster they fought was equally strange—a Darkness Wolf, powerful even by the standards of this world. It was a Unique creature, attacking the Fiends from the shadows with its spells and claws, slowly thinning them down.

“We can’t waste the life Lady Murelia gave us,” a demon muttered through his teeth.

Try as he might, he couldn’t detect the jet-black spells that kept firing off around him. He knew the wolf had his unit on the run.

“Hold it down, you damn Fiends! Even if it costs you your lives!”

Somehow, the Fiends obeyed.

“Gyagya!”

“Gyaoooo!”

“Gyaargh!”

They surrounded the wolf, and some even latched onto it. They may have had no respect for the demon commanding them, but they obeyed his words completely—or rather, obeyed the force of Murelia’s authority. She had transformed these hedonistic monsters into a real fighting force.

“Grrr...grooaaar!”

However, the direwolf was stronger—rushing through the pack even with goblins hanging off its back, tearing its enemies apart.

The Fiends couldn't defeat the wolf, even though they were prepared to die for it. So, the battle raged on, blood soaking into the earth.

Why hadn't the direwolf fled? It was faster than these creatures and could outrun them if it wanted. What reason did the wolf have to keep fighting? Was it protecting its territory, or simply too stubborn to quit?

In fact, it was neither of these reasons.

"We have no time for you, you damned dog! The city must fall!"

"Grrrgh!"

The direwolf and demon had one thing in common: they both fought for Green Goat. The demon was set on the city's destruction, but the wolf's master had sworn to save it. Jet wanted to make his masters happy—both the small one, and her sword. If it would make them smile, he would happily risk his life.



The demon glowered at the stubborn wolf. “Rejoice, you filthy dog! I shall use my greatest weapon to destroy you!”

He focused his energy until it outstripped even his capacity to contain it—the spell tearing through his very life force and converting it to mana.

“Grr...” Jet growled, sensing the impending danger.

“Now, Fiends!”

“Hrr?”

The demon signaled, and the Fiends surrounding Jet blew up—a chain of suicidal explosions with enough force to destroy a hut. Even if he knew the demon’s plan, Jet had no chance to defend against it.

“Yaaargh! Corruption Wedge!” With his remaining mana, the demon launched himself at Jet with speed that rivaled a diving falcon. “I have you now!”

He plunged through the explosion, tearing into Jet’s paw with total disregard for his own safety. No matter how fast Jet was, he couldn’t respond in time.

“Die!”

The demon’s claws flashed straight for Jet’s face. Jet was much larger and faster than the demon, and for a moment, it looked as though the attack wouldn’t land.

“Gyaiin!”

Jet howled. The demon had imbued his claws with malice, and the curse racked Jet’s body, sucking the life out of him. Jet curled up in pain. He felt that his body was failing. If he kept fighting, he would die. Still, he turned to his attacker and pressed on.

“Gaaah! You bastard! What is wrong with you?!”

“Raaargh!”

If Jet stopped now, the demon would destroy Green Goat. He had to keep fighting, even if it cost his life.

“Grooooooar!” He sank his jaws into the demon’s body.

“No! But the curse took hold of you...you...!”

Jet bit down with all his might, feeling the demon go limp in his jaws.

“You’re going to die here...”

“Grr...”

The demon’s dying words rang true. Even as it perished, Jet’s own body crumpled beneath him. His legs could no longer support him, and the Fiends were everywhere, slowly closing in to strike the killing blow.

Jet’s muzzle twisted bitterly—not at losing the battle, but at the fact that he would never see his masters again. His vision wavered and faded. There was nothing he could do to stop the Fiends all around him from finishing the job.

He waited for death, but death never came.

“Fiends! Get your dirty hands away from him!”

“Gya gyaooooo!”

“Giiiiii!”

A savior appeared, dispersing the monsters. “You fought well, Jet! You saved Green Goat!”

“Urr...”

“I’m healing you now. Hang in there, friend!”

Jet couldn’t see who was stroking his muzzle and feeding him potions. Although his vision had failed, however, his nose was still true. He knew exactly who came to his aid.

“You can leave the rest to me.”

“Arf...”

His thoughts slipped away into sleep, and he dozed off, reassured.

“I must thank my lucky stars,” said the voice. “To think I have so many Fiends to fight so soon! They shall make for good sport.”

The tides of battle had changed, and Fran was in trouble. She tried desperately to end the fight so that she could help her kinsmen, but the Valkyrie and her Fiends harassed Fran at every turn.

“Move!”

“Gyagya!”

“Gyoa!”

Between the Sword God’s Blessing and Flashing Thunderclap, Fran was the fastest thing on the battlefield. She charged through ranks of Fiends to reach the Valkyrie, swinging wild and wide—trying to finish the battle with one attack. That only made it easier for the Dullahan to block. It took the brunt of the punishment, while the Valkyrie danced away, ready to exploit the gaps in Fran’s defense. None had proved fatal yet, but it seemed like it was only a matter of time.

“Urrrghh!”

Fran, calm down! I urged her.

I’m trying...!

If it wasn’t for our enemies’ damage transfer ability, the fight would already be over. How were they doing this? Was it some kind of Shield Art to transfer damage to their minions? It wasn’t a buff or a spell, and they didn’t have any other skills or equipment that could do that—I would have noticed it with Identify. That left either their weapons or their titles.

The High Orc shieldmen’s Shield Arts, or the Advanced Shield Arts the Minotaur dark paladins possessed, seemed like the most likely culprit—especially because the Minotaur high swordsmen and High Orc warriors were already using their Shield Arts to save the Dullahan from lethal injury.

If either of those turned out to be the cause, we were in for a rough fight. Half the Fiends on the battlefield had Shield Arts. That didn’t mean they *all* had that specific skill, but what if they did? We couldn’t just cut through dozens of them—they were too powerful. Besides, the Valkyrie and Dullahan had so far prevented us from decimating their minions. They attacked us the second we took our attention off them.

We were reaching the end of our rope, and Fran was getting hurt quicker than I could heal her. Still, she had to keep fighting to make the most of Flashing Thunderclap. When it wore off, she would crumble.

The longer this went on, the more aggressive the Valkyrie became, firing arrows even when they risked striking the Dullahan. The arrows exploded left, right, and center, but any damage the Dullahan might have taken immediately transferred to other Fiends. Meanwhile, Fran was almost dead on her feet.

When she struggled to get back up, the Valkyrie sneered at her. “Aha ha ha! Have you time to fall when your friends are dying, even as we speak?”

Block her out, Fran! She’s trying to get in your head!

“Urgh...” Fran ground her teeth and glared at the Valkyrie. She was losing control.

I had no choice but to use our trump card: Skill Taker. However, I still didn’t know which skill to take, or who to take it from. The Valkyrie and the Dullahan were both well-balanced fighters. Nothing I chose would cripple them completely.

The best thing I could think of was either the Valkyrie’s Advanced Bow Arts or the Dullahan’s Advanced Shield Arts. That would knock their firepower down significantly, even if it didn’t stop them altogether. While they fretted over the lost skill, maybe we’d even get the chance to go in for the kill.

But which skill do I take...?

I was about to consult Fran about my decision when another attack struck.

“Come on!”

“Urgh...aah!”

As Fran lost concentration, her Stealth Skills began to fail. The Valkyrie read our teleport path.

“Guaaah! Eergh!”

An arrow pierced Fran’s left side as her right leg was blown to bits. She immediately regenerated, but before her leg even grew all the way back, it twisted and broke, and her arm was torn away. The Valkyrie used up her mana, determined to put Fran down.

Fran, keep regenerating!

“Hurgh...!”

Fran’s willpower still burned within her, but her body started to fail. She wanted the Valkyrie dead more than anything else in the world, but the blood loss and pain took their toll on her young body. She wouldn’t last much longer!

“Aaaaagh!”

No! Fran, calm down! But I couldn't stop her.

Fran charged in recklessly, as though facing down some two-bit Fiend. However, her opponent was a towering Valkyrie, and Fran's mind was close to breaking.

What should I do? Could I teleport us far enough away that we could deal with weaker units? Fran would never allow it. If this Valkyrie got past us, it wouldn't just be the end of Green Goat, it could destroy the entire Beastman Nation!

If only I could work out which skill to take from them! I was so frantic and distracted trying to decide that I almost didn't notice when something unexpected happened.

Teacher, something's coming.

Yeah, I feel it, too!

Something powerful approached from the southwest, and it was coming in fast. Surely, the Fiends couldn't have *more* reinforcements? No, I didn't think that was what it was. Those would have come from the north, and besides, the Valkyrie looked just as surprised as we were.

"It's here!" Fran cried.

Above!

Suddenly, the fighting stopped. Everyone looked up at the thing descending from the morning sky.

"Kuooooon!"

"A wyvern?" the Valkyrie muttered. "No—a dragon?"

The red dragon must have been almost ten meters long. It flapped its powerful wings, glaring down at the battlefield with golden eyes as though scanning for prey. Eventually, the Fiends stopped staring and got into an anti-air formation.

The dragon was a little smaller than some, but it was at least a C-Threat. Moreover, its presence on the battlefield might finally turn the tide. Dragons were majestic creatures, even when they were small. It was impossible to take your eyes off them.

Still, Fran and I both knew that we had nothing to fear from this uninvited guest. In fact, Fran grinned from ear to ear.

"Burn them to cinders, Lind!"

“Kuoooooooo!”

We knew that pale girl with the pixie cut and burning crimson eyes, riding on the back of that dragon.

“Quite a fight you’ve gotten into, Fran! Would you like some backup?”

“Mea!”

The mysterious girl we’d met in the Forest of the Scorpion Lion had returned.

Epilogue

MEA LOOKED UPON the battlefield with her ever-confident grin.

Her maid, Quina, sat on Lind's back behind her as the red dragon descended from the sky.

"Go, Lind! I don't think they caught your name the first time!"

"Kuooooooo!" Lind breathed fire across the battlefield again, burning a good twenty monsters to a crisp.

The Valkyrie drew her bow and aimed directly at Lind, trying to take the dragon down while it was busy with her minions.

"Teacher!" Fran cried.

Don't worry, I reassured her.

I already knew the arrow wouldn't hit Lind, even if Fran and the Valkyrie didn't realize it yet.

"You have a fine way of entering the battlefield," said the Valkyrie. "But you must leave as quickly as you came!"

She loosed her arrow, but it flew straight through Lind and off into the day after tomorrow. Fran and the Valkyrie blinked upward, shocked.

"What just—?!" the Valkyrie cried.

An illusion? Fran asked.

A phantom, to be more exact. One crafted by an expert.

The phantom dragon sailed over us as Fran struggled back to her feet.

"Come, Fran!" the phantom Mea shouted. "I shall lend you a helping hand!"

"Never mind me!" Fran cried. "You have to stop the other squads!" I felt her heart thump with worry for the other armies closing in on Green Goat.

Mea only laughed. "Ha ha ha! Do not fret! You speak of the forces that came from the east and west, yes? I dealt with one, and the other

has fallen!”

“Really?” Fran asked. She couldn’t believe it.

“Indeed. So, be not afraid! I have turned the Fiends in the west into EXP! I even leveled up. Look how big Lind is now!”

“Kuooooo!”

“I talked to the marquis of Green Goat,” Mea went on. “We dispatched guards to meet the refugees. They are likely already there!”

Even without Essence of Falsehood, I knew that Mea was telling the truth. The girl was strangely persuasive, and Fran heaved a huge sigh of relief. The Valkyrie believed Mea too, although it was less reassuring for her!



“Impossible,” said the Valkyrie. “You defeated Lady Murelia’s Fiend army...? And the western squad? They were led by a demon and a powerful Dullahan!”

“They were pretty strong, I’ll give you that. But not strong enough to take on two of us.”

“Two of you?” The Valkyrie squinted at Mea.

“You heard me. Two of us.”

As Mea grinned, I finally noticed that the figure behind her had vanished. Where had she gone?

“It seems ill advised to leave yourself so defenseless, battlemaiden,” Mea said.

Before the Valkyrie could answer, she let out a shrill cry and twisted with intense pain. A hand stuck out straight through her chest—the hand of a woman who’d blended into the shadows behind her.

I knew Quina was strong, but this was ridiculous!

“I am Lady Mea’s personal assistant. Pleased to make your acquaintance. How strange that you are unharmed when I have crushed your heart.”

Quina had used Phantom Magic to create the Mea-and-Lind illusion. She was an expert at it, too. It really had fooled everyone.

Unfortunately, Quina wasn’t fully aware of the Valkyrie’s abilities when she used her killing technique. Her face was as calm as still water, but she must have been surprised. Maybe she was panicking inside? She really was the queen of poker faces.

“Bwa ha ha!” Mea laughed. “Excellent, Quina! For all your chatter in private, I knew I could count on you on the battlefield!”

Quina bowed politely to the Valkyrie and retreated. I really couldn’t get a read on that woman!

“Damn it all!” the Valkyrie cried. “I didn’t think we’d face so much interference!”

“Bwa ha ha!” Mea laughed. “Unfortunately, I shall not allow the likes of you to kill my rival!”

“She is the closest thing you have to a friend, after all,” Quina observed.

“Silence, you! She is my rival! Not my friend!”

“There you go again,” Quina sighed. “I suppose you must have mixed feelings about Fran, given that she took the Black Lightning nickname before you.”

“Shut up, Quina! I mean, honestly! She’s called the Black Lightning Princess!”

“Yes,” Quina said, “whilst, despite all your best efforts, the best nicknames you’ve gained are the Pale Flame Princess, Pale Mad Beast, and Pale Tantrum Thrower.”

“I...don’t know whether to feel flattered or insulted,” Mea scowled.

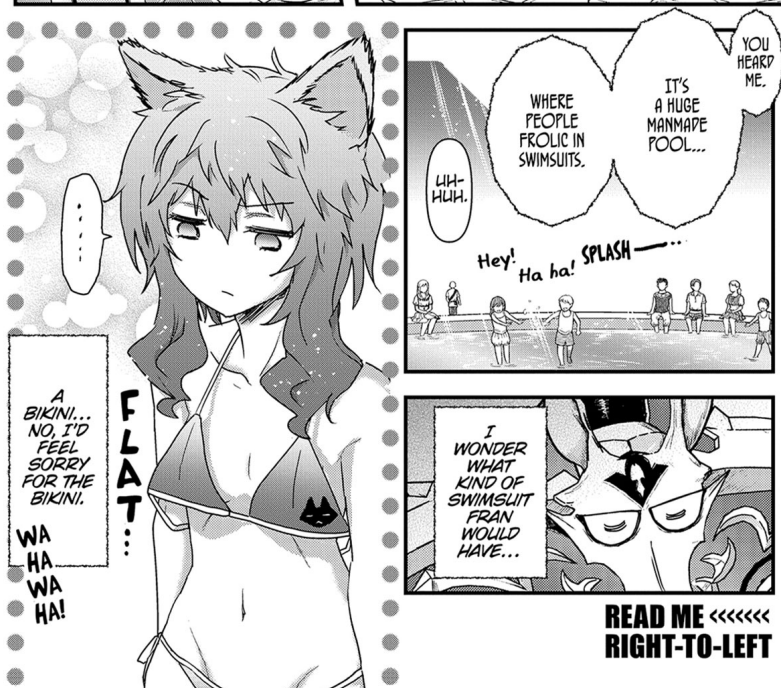
“My apologies.”

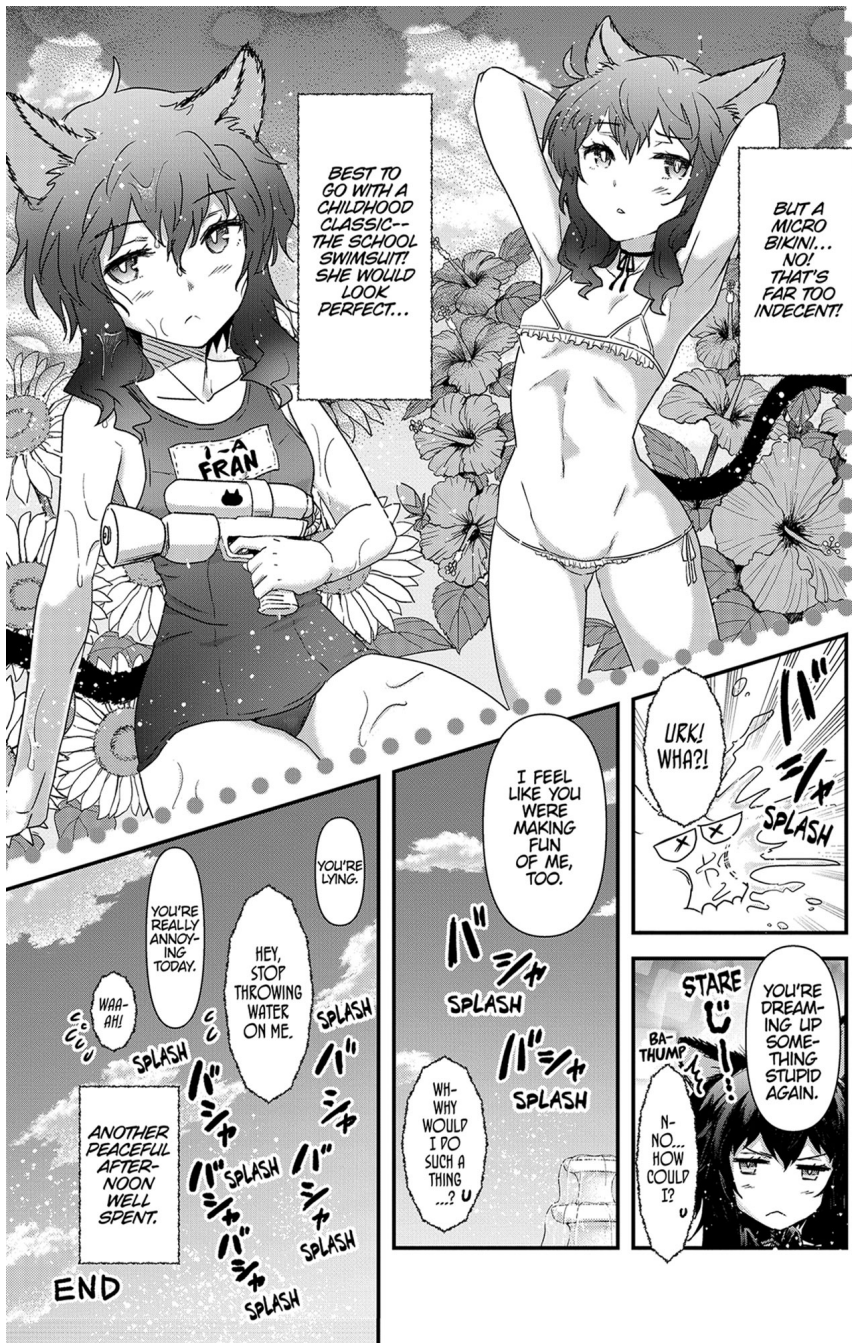
“Enough!” said Mea. “Fran is my rival! I will destroy anyone who tries to defeat her before me!”

Quina frowned. “It baffles me how you can be so straightforward in battle, and yet so roundabout with your feelings.”

“S-silence! Now, come!” Mea shouted.

She jumped off Lind’s back and into the thick of the battle.





BEST TO
GO WITH A
CHILDHOOD
CLASSIC--
THE SCHOOL
SWIMSUIT!
SHE WOULD
LOOK
PERFECT...

BUT A
MICRO
BIKINI...
NO!
THAT'S
FAR TOO
INDECENT!

I-A
FRAN

I FEEL
LIKE YOU
WERE
MAKING
FUN OF
ME,
TOO.

URKI
WHA?!

SPLASH

YOU'RE
LYING.

YOU'RE
REALLY
ANNOY-
ING
TODAY.

HEY,
STOP
THROWING
WATER
ON ME.

SPLASH

ANOTHER
PEACEFUL
AFTER-
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SPLASH

WHY
WOULD
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